



The Gypsoteca Hall of the Graeco-Roman Museum in Alexandria

Ahmed Elsayed Hafez Khalil Elsakhawy

Lecturer at the Department of Tourist Guidance – Higher Institute for Tourism and Hotels, Hurghada

ABSTRACT

The Graeco-Roman Museum in Alexandria, Egypt, established in 1892, showcases artifacts from the Greek and Roman periods. After a major renovation from 2005 to 2015, the museum expanded with new upper floors, modern displays, and improved curatorial methods that highlight the Hellenistic to Roman eras. A key feature is the Gypsoteca Hall, which displays plaster casts of famous classical sculptures, such as the *Aphrodite of Cyrene* and *Nike Adjusting Her Sandal*, sourced from museums across Europe and North Africa. These casts allow visitors to experience important artworks otherwise unavailable, supporting art education, research, and cultural preservation. The hall promotes international collaboration and provides a valuable learning space, making classical art more accessible and enriching Alexandria's cultural scene.

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KEYWORDS

The Graeco-Roman Museum, Gypsoteca, plaster casts, Alexandria.

قاعة الجيبسوتيكا بمتحف الإسكندرية اليوناني الروماني

أحمد السيد حافظ خليل السخاوي

مدرس بقسم الإرشاد السياحي – المعهد العالي للسياحة والفنادق بالغردقة

الملخص

يُعد متحف الآثار اليونانية الرومانية في الإسكندرية، مصر، والذي تأسس عام 1892، من أبرز المتاحف التي تعرض آثارًا من العصور اليونانية والرومانية. وبعد تجديد شامل بين عامي 2005 و2015، توسع المتحف بإضافة طوابق علوية جديدة، وعروض حديثة، وأساليب تنظيم متطورة تُبرز فترات العصرين الهلنستي والروماني. ومن أبرز أقسام المتحف "قاعة الجيبسوتيكا"، التي تضم نسخًا جبسية لأعمال نحتية كلاسيكية شهيرة مثل "أفروديت قورينا" و"نايكي تعدل صندلها"، جُمعت من متاحف في أوروبا وشمال أفريقيا. تتيح هذه النسخ للزوار فرصة مشاهدة أعمال فنية مهمة يصعب الوصول إليها، كما تدعم التعليم الفني، والبحث العلمي، والحفاظ على التراث الثقافي. وتساهم القاعة في تعزيز التعاون الدولي، وتوفر مساحة تعليمية قيّمة، مما يجعل الفن الكلاسيكي أكثر إتاحة ويساهم في إثراء المشهد الثقافي في الإسكندرية.

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Introduction

The Gypsoteca Hall is among the most distinguished sections of the Graeco-Roman Museum in Alexandria. It showcases meticulously crafted plaster replicas of iconic statues and sculptures from the Greek and Roman eras. The purpose of the hall is to offer visitors a chance to explore models of celebrated artworks that are typically inaccessible, thereby enriching their appreciation and understanding of classical art while also serving as a valuable resource for education and research in archaeology and the arts.

Significance of the Research

The research helps enhance cultural and artistic understanding of how the Gypsoteca Hall contributes to preserving cultural heritage and explaining the history of classical art. It also highlights the role of the Gypsoteca Hall at the Graeco-Roman Museum in Alexandria as a key tool for transferring classical art and culture between communities and international museums. Additionally, the importance of the research lies in shedding light on how educational institutions, such as art academies and universities, benefit from plaster casts in the Gypsoteca. The research also opens the door for researchers to explore the relationships between different cultures through plaster casts and to compare artistic styles in Greek and Roman civilizations.

Research Objectives

- Exploring the Role of the Gypsoteca Hall in the Graeco-Roman Museum of Alexandria: A Study on How Plaster Casts are Used in Museums to Enhance Artistic Awareness and Art Education.
- Analyzing the Importance of Plaster Casts in Preserving Cultural Heritage: A Review of the Role of Plaster Casts in Preserving Artworks that May Be Inaccessible or Susceptible to Damage.
- Studying Cultural Exchange Between International Museums: Highlighting the Role of the Gypsoteca Hall in Facilitating Cultural Exchange Between Museums in Europe, North Africa, and Egypt.
- Analyzing the Educational Value of Plaster Casts in Academic and Artistic Education: A Study on How They Are Used in Art Schools and Universities as an Educational Tool.
- Reviewing the Impact of the Renovation of the Graeco-Roman Museum of Alexandria on Visitor Experience: A Study on How the Museum's Renovation in 2015 Enhanced Visitor Experience and Cultural Understanding.

Research Problem

- The Gypsoteca Hall at the Graeco-Roman Museum is a unique hall, unlike any other found in Egyptian museums.
- The Value of Plaster Casts in the Contemporary Era: The educational and cultural value of plaster casts is a contentious issue in academic and artistic circles, as there is skepticism about their ability to represent original works with the same level of significance.

- Challenges in Preserving Plaster Casts: The challenge lies in how to preserve and protect plaster casts from damage, as some museums face difficulties in maintaining these casts due to aging and frequent use.
- Inadequate Representation of Classical Art: Museums face challenges in accurately representing original classical art through plaster casts, as some casts may be inaccurate or unable to convey the artistic authenticity of the original works.
- Lack of Awareness about the Importance of Plaster Casts: The research problem lies in the general lack of awareness regarding the importance of plaster casts in art education and their role in facilitating access to rare classical works that can only be accessed through these replicas.
- The Gap between Original Works and Plaster Casts: One of the problems faced by researchers and artists is the gap between the artistic value of original works and plaster casts, which may not have the same visual and artistic impact as the original artworks.

The Old Museum

The Graeco-Roman Museum in Alexandria stands as one of Egypt's most prominent cultural institutions and remains the only museum in the country devoted exclusively to the artifacts and heritage of Egypt during the Greek and Roman periods. Efforts to safeguard Alexandria's archaeological treasures began in 1889 under the leadership of the Italian Giuseppe Botti, then head of the city's Department of Antiquities. His dedication to rescuing artifacts from destruction and smuggling culminated in the official opening of the museum on October 17, 189. Founded during the reign of Khedive Abbas Helmy II, the museum initially occupied a modest two-story structure comprising 26 galleries. Giuseppe Botti served as its first director¹.

The Museum after Renovation

In September 2005, the museum was closed temporarily to undergo extensive renovation and modernization. After a decade-long hiatus, the renovation project of the Graeco-Roman Museum finally resumed in April 2015. This new phase marked a significant turning point in the museum's history, as a completely reimagined architectural and museological vision was introduced. Central to the new design was the addition of an upper floor, which allowed for the expansion of the museum's spatial and functional capacities. Alongside these structural changes, a fresh curatorial approach was adopted, aiming to enhance the visitor experience through a more engaging and thematically organized display of the collections. A comprehensive plan was introduced to reimagine its exhibitions, focusing on thematic displays that underscore the richness of Egyptian civilization from the Hellenistic era through to the end of Roman rule in 641 AD².

¹ Greek and Roman Museum of Alexandria, *Brochure in Arabic*. Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, Egypt.

هيئة الآثار المصرية، المتحف اليوناني الروماني. الإسكندرية، 1895: مطبعة هيئة الآثار المصرية، 1، 2.

² Greek and Roman Museum of Alexandria, *Brochure in Arabic*.
<https://egy monuments.gov.eg/ar/museums/graeco-roman-museum>

By 2018, the actual implementation of this ambitious design plan began. The restructured museum now features a mezzanine level situated between the ground and upper floors. This intermediate floor serves as a vital hub for educational and scholarly activities. It houses four specialized rooms: a Museum Education Hall designed to host workshops and programs for students and young visitors; an Archive and Documentation Room dedicated to the systematic recording and preservation of the museum's collections; the Gypsoteca Hall, which showcases plaster casts of classical masterpieces; and a Study Room that provides researchers and scholars with a quiet space to engage deeply with the museum's materials³.

The History of the Gypsoteca

Since ancient times, plaster has been used to create masks, plaster sculptures, and copies of bronze statues, as seen in Greece and Rome. During the Middle Ages, plaster works were rare, except for Moorish decorations in the Alhambra Palace in Granada, Spain⁴. However, in the 16th century, Italy witnessed a revival of plaster art thanks to artists such as Raphael Sanzio and Giovanni da Udine⁵.

In the 17th century, Dutch artists used plaster casts to enhance their skills and elevate their social and professional status⁶. By the 19th century, plaster casts had become essential educational tools in art academies and museums, with molds exchanged between institutions to supplement archaeological collections and conduct comparative studies⁷. During the 19th century, specialized workshops for plaster cast production emerged, particularly in Italy, where craftsmen known as *Figurina* created and sold plaster statues while traveling through major cities across Europe and America⁸. The low cost of plaster casts compared to original works contributed to the establishment of exceptional collections in museums and universities⁹. In the 19th century, they became an integral part of Europe's cultural identity and a tool for competition among European nations, particularly in Germany, which became a center for the plaster cast movement aimed at archaeological studies¹⁰.

³ <https://www.presidency.eg/ar/المشاريع-القومية/project-16102023/>

⁴ Risdonne, V., Hubbard, C., López Borges, V. H., & Theodorakopoulos, C. (2022). Materials and Techniques for the Coating of Nineteenth-century Plaster Casts: A Review of Historical Sources. *Studies in Conservation*, Vol.67, No. 4, 188.

⁵ Nichols, M. F. (2006). Plaster cast sculpture: A history of touch. *Archaeological Review from Cambridge*, Vol. 21, No. 2, 116.

⁶ Lores-Chavez, I. (2023). The Plaster Cast and the Intimacy of the Studio. *Ge-conservación*, no. 23, 121, 122.

⁷ Peltier, F. (2023). Plaster – An Artistic Production in the Museum of Marble in Rance – Belgium. *Ge-conservación*, no. 23, 159.

⁸ Demir, S. (2024). Plaster of Paris/Chalkware Figurines: Period Showcase Objects in Turkish Houses. *Journal of Society and Identity*, Vol. 1, Issue 1, 82, 83.

⁹ Risdonne, V., Hubbard, C., López Borges, V. H., & Theodorakopoulos, C. (2022). Materials and Techniques for the Coating of Nineteenth-century Plaster Casts, 188; Kockel, V. (2010). Plaster models and plaster casts of classical architecture and its decoration. In R. Frederiksen & E. Marchand (Eds.), *Plaster casts: Making, collecting and displaying from classical antiquity to the present*, *Transformationen der Antike*, Vol. 18, 420.

¹⁰ Manship, E., Jaccard, P., & Felici, A. (2020). Re-envisioning criteria for documentation of plaster artist models in museum collections. *Estudos de Conservação e Restauro*, (11), 82, 85.

Despite the great value that plaster casts held in the 19th century, the 20th century witnessed a gradual decline in interest in them. Many casts were placed in storage in major museums such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, where their rediscovery began in the 1970s. In Europe, plaster cast collections remained valuable until the early 20th century, but they gradually fell into obscurity. Unlike original artworks, casts did not receive the same level of care, leading to damage and deterioration due to inappropriate display methods. The value of plaster casts was increasingly questioned beyond their educational use, as concerns emerged that the casts could be misinterpreted by the public. Additionally, they were seen as lacking the artistic aura that gives original works a unique connection to the artist¹¹.

The role of museums underwent a profound transformation, particularly in the United States after 1870. Once educational institutions devoted to enlightening the public, American museums evolved into guardians of original artworks. This shift was driven by changes in the European art market, coupled with increasing financial resources, which enabled curators to acquire original pieces that had been considered unattainable just a generation earlier. Curators and the art dealers they collaborated with became especially focused on purchasing and exhibiting originals, leading to growing demands for the removal of plaster casts from public displays. At the same time, the once-harmless practice of plaster casting came under scrutiny, as it was accused of potentially damaging original artifacts, accelerating the decline of casts in a cultural climate increasingly concerned with historical preservation¹².

Over the past twenty years, there has been renewed interest in studying and preserving plaster casts, particularly amid debates about whether casts possess intrinsic value or are merely duplicates. A deeper understanding of the terms "copy" and "reproduction" in critical theory has inspired a more thoughtful intellectual approach to managing, caring for, and conserving these collections. In this review, the terms "copy," "reproduction," and "model" are used interchangeably, even though their meanings have evolved over time¹³.

By the early twentieth century, plaster casts had multiplied and become deeply embedded in many aspects of cultural and intellectual life. However, photography began to gain greater prevalence and versatility, gradually replacing many of the traditional functions of plaster casts. Photography provided travel mementos through postcards and tourist snapshots, documented archaeological discoveries, and was reproduced by visual artists. Whereas sculptures had once been known through plaster casts thanks to figures like Winckelmann, they are now—and continue to be—recognized by students of art history and archaeology primarily through illustrated volumes and photographic slides¹⁴.

As the destruction of plaster casts began to draw the attention of historians such as Jenkins, academic interest in their history grew, prompting their gradual reappearance

¹¹ Risdonne, V., Hubbard, C., López Borges, V. H., & Theodorakopoulos, C. (2022). Materials and Techniques for the Coating of Nineteenth-century Plaster Casts, 189.

¹² Torello, F. (2022). Plaster casts, augmented: Architecture in the museum and the impact of digital media. *RA. Revista de Arquitectura*, 24, 192.

¹³ Risdonne, V., Hubbard, C., López Borges, V. H., & Theodorakopoulos, C. (2022). Materials and Techniques for the Coating of Nineteenth-century Plaster Casts, 186.

¹⁴ Nichols, M. F. (2006). Plaster cast sculpture: A history of touch, 118.

in museum displays across Europe and the Americas. MacGill noted in 1987 that small museums were acquiring casts from the Metropolitan Museum despite restoration costs. By 1999, the A.I.C.P.M launched a global database of over 100 cast collections, with many institutions reopening access. Today, 115 collections exist in Europe and 30 elsewhere. Historic display practices have been revived, with casts used again in museums like the Ashmolean and the Skulpturhalle. Major institutions, such as the Victoria and Albert Museum, now prominently feature casts. Interest increasingly focuses on their role in exploring representations of the body, as Paul Zanker noted in 2005, describing the Royal Copenhagen collection as a "dream house" of diverse bodily forms¹⁵.

The Gypsoteca Hall in the Graeco-Roman Museum

The Graeco-Roman Museum boasts a unique feature unmatched by any other institution in Egypt — the Gypsoteca Hall. This singular space is the only one of its kind in the country, dedicated entirely to the display of plaster casts. The hall houses meticulously crafted replicas of classical masterpieces, representing artworks from renowned museums across Europe, Egypt, and Libya. By bringing together these faithful reproductions, the Gypsoteca offers visitors a rare opportunity to engage with iconic sculptures and reliefs that would otherwise be scattered across international collections, thereby enriching the educational and cultural experience within the museum.

Collections of the Gypsoteca Hall

The hall features an impressive collection of plaster casts sourced from various European, Arab museums (Fig. 1). These replicas encompass a diverse range of classical art forms, including full statues, sculpted reliefs, and busts. The selection reflects a broad artistic and geographical spectrum.

Statues

1- Statue of Poseidon or Zeus

A replica of the statue of Poseidon or Zeus is displayed in the hall, which is based on the original currently housed at the National Archaeological Museum of Athens. The statue is thought to depict either Poseidon or Zeus (Fig. 2), two prominent gods in ancient Greek mythology. Poseidon was the god of the sea, while Zeus was the king of the gods, often associated with thunder and the sky. The statue was found at the bottom of the sea near Cape Artemision on the island of Euboea, which is located in the Aegean Sea. The location of its discovery suggests that the statue may have been lost or submerged due to some historical event or shipwreck. The statue dates back to around 460 BC. The god is shown in a wide stride, extending the left arm forward, while with the right he will have a trident or a thunderbolt. Opinions differ as to whether Poseidon or Zeus is depicted¹⁶.

¹⁵ Nichols, M. F. (2006). Plaster cast sculpture: A history of touch, 119, 120.

¹⁶ Barbati-Vartsou, E. (2016). *National Archaeological Museum: 150 years*. Athens: Ministry of Culture and Sports – National Archaeological Museum.
<https://www.namuseum.gr/en/collection/klasiki-periodos-3/>

2- Statue of “Aphrodite of Cyrene”

The Gypsoteca Hall displays a replica of the “Aphrodite of Cyrene statue” (Fig. 3), originally housed in the Cyrene Museum in Libya¹⁷.

The height of the statue is approximately 1.72 meters. It is headless, with only the beginning of the neck remaining; it broke precisely where one would expect — at the neck and arms — with only a fragment of the right arm preserved. The feet are together, and the left knee is slightly bent. The torso tilts gently to the right, as does the absent head, suggesting she was in the act of arranging her hair. Having just stepped out of the bath, she was leaning on her right leg, with both arms raised to fix her hair, which explains why the right arm is less preserved. On the remaining part of the other arm, there is a small nipple at the spot where a lock of hair would have reached. The entire body gives the impression of youthful flesh — firm and responsive to touch. It is flesh with skin; the marble itself seems to have an epidermis. The muscles can be felt with the eyes, revealing that sight, here, functions as a refined sense of touch. The breasts, in particular, are the peak of youthful perfection, as shown by the barely visible curves connecting them to the armpits. She represents the woman at the precise moment of youthful bloom — yesterday would have been too early, tomorrow too late. The marble retains traces of the dry, reddish earth in which it was buried. Statues absorb the energy of the earth; they need centuries underground to acquire their sacred fire, just like diamonds. The flexed leg reveals relaxed muscles, while the other leg visibly supports the body’s weight. The resting buttock appears elongated, while the other is taut. The crease between the buttocks, the flattening of the lower back, the delicate emergence of the spine, the meeting of the thighs and the sensual spaces they form when touching and separating¹⁸.

3- Bust of Athina at Zappeion Mansion

The Gypsoteca Hall displays a replica of the Bust of Athena, a remarkable work by the sculptor Ioannis Kossos. It is considered one of the finest examples of 19th-century neoclassical sculpture and one of the most renowned representations of the goddess in Modern Greek art. The original version of this bust is exhibited at the Zappeion Mansion (Fig. 4), a historic building located in the heart of Athens, the capital of Greece. The presence of the goddess Athena in this location carries deep

¹⁷ In the early 20th century, the Aphrodite of Cyrene—a Roman artwork dating back to the Hellenistic era—was discovered among the ruins of the ancient city of Cyrene in Libya by an Italian archaeological mission during the colonial period. The statue was transferred to Rome, where it was considered for years a part of Italy’s artistic heritage, especially for its pure classical beauty and Greek influence linked to the school of Praxiteles. However, the statue later became the center of a heated political and cultural controversy when the Italian government decided in 2008 to return it to Libya as part of a friendship agreement between the two countries. This move was seen by some intellectuals as a concession to the pressure of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, who demanded the return of looted Libyan antiquities. The Aphrodite of Cyrene statue was kept in the National Roman Museum (Palazzo Massimo alle Terme) in Rome while it was in Italy. After being returned to Libya in 2008, it was transferred to the Cyrene Museum, where it was displayed as part of the recovered Libyan archaeological heritage.

Blanco Freijeiro, A. (1978). Arte griego: La época helenística. Madrid: *Historia* 16, 390;
<https://nicovalerio.blogspot.com/2008/09/venere-di-cirene-e-un-simbolo.html>

¹⁸ Aristizábal Montoya, S. (2011). *La écfrasis y la narración filosófica en El hermafrodita dormido de Fernando González* [Trabajo de maestría, Universidad EAFIT]. Universidad EAFIT, 18, 19.

symbolism, representing wisdom, civic virtue, and the enduring connection between ancient Greek heritage and the modern Greek state¹⁹.

Heads (Busts)

1- Male Head of Alexander the Great

The Gypsoteca Hall includes a plaster replica of the head of Alexander the Great, housed in the Museo di Scultura Antica Giovanni Barracco in Italy (Fig. 5). This over life-size marble head is a Roman sculpture from the 2nd century A.D., created after a Greek original dating to the late 4th century B.C. Carved from fine Pentelic marble and acquired in Rome, the head is turned sideways and slightly backwards in a classic heroic pose, a stylistic choice often used to evoke divinity or idealized nobility. The facial features are strong and harmonious, with a slightly parted mouth adding a sense of vitality. Most striking is the thick, wavy hair arranged in an upward swirl over the forehead—a hallmark known as the anastolè, which is characteristic of portraits of Alexander the Great. Notably, the sculpted back of the head was crafted to accommodate an additional marble piece, likely forming a conical headdress. This technical feature suggests that the head may represent one of the Dioscuri twins, Castor or Pollux, whose iconography was sometimes modeled after Alexander's idealized portraiture²⁰.

2- Marble Head of Alexander the Great

The Gypsoteca Hall includes a replica of the head of Alexander the Great, currently housed in the British Museum (Fig. 6). This marble portrait head of Alexander the Great dates from between 300 and 150 BC and belongs to the Hellenistic period. It was reportedly excavated in Alexandria, Egypt, a city founded by Alexander himself following his conquest of the region in 332 BC. The sculpture, measuring 37 cm in height, 22 cm in width, and 24 cm in depth, was originally designed to fit into a separately made body. The back of the head is worked to receive an additional hair element, likely made of stucco or plaster. Despite minor abrasions, the marble surface remains in good condition. The head features a dynamic twist and upward gaze, stylistic traits associated with the posthumous, god-like depictions of Alexander, contrasting with the more mature and heroic early representations. Alexander is shown clean-shaven—an innovation of his image that influenced royal portraiture for centuries—and likely wears a royal diadem, symbolizing Hellenistic kingship. While none of the original portraits by artists like Lysippos or Apelles survive, this example embodies the idealized features attributed to Alexander in literature. Acquired in 1872 from Rollin & Feuardent, the head reflects the enduring legacy of Alexander's iconography in Egyptian and broader Greco-Roman culture, and it remains on display in Gallery 22 of the British Museum²¹.

¹⁹ <https://www.zappeion.gr/en/zappeion-tour/statues.html>

²⁰ <https://www.museobarracco.it/en/opera/testa-maschile-alessandro-magno>

²¹ Killerich, B. (2017). *The head posture of Alexander the Great*. Acta ad archaeologiam et artium historian pertinentia, 9; Wheeler, B. I. (1900). *Alexander the Great: The merging of East and West in universal history*. G.P. Putnam's Sons, 350.

https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G_1872-0515-1

3- Head of the Goddess Aphrodite

The idealized features and crown in this striking image identify it as representing the goddess Aphrodite (Fig. 7). The calcite alabaster is characterized by its pale, translucent yellow hue, which has changed color due to centuries of burial in the earth. Earrings made of gold or another contrasting material would have hung from her pierced ears. Other details, such as the decoration of the crown, were certainly rendered in paint. The goddess's hair, parted at the center of the forehead, was pulled back in two rolls along the sides of the head and braided at the nape.

4- Head of Hadrian

This head is larger than life-size and depicts Emperor Hadrian as a mature man (Fig. 8). The head has a square shape with a broad forehead. The eyes are almond-shaped, with very thin eyelids set beneath sharply defined eyebrows. The nose is straight and broad, and the lips are thin. Distinct nasolabial folds frame the mustache. The head features a well-groomed mustache and a full but short beard. Thick, curly hair crowns the head.

Reliefs

1- Nike Adjusting Her Sandal Relief

The Gypsoteca Hall includes a plaster relief of the goddess Nike Adjusting Her Sandal. The original relief of Nike Adjusting Her Sandal is housed in the Acropolis Museum (Fig. 9). Created around 410 BC by the workshop of Agorakritos, this marble slab formed part of the decorative parapet that once surrounded the Temple of Athena Nike on the Acropolis of Athens. Carved from fine Pentelic marble, the relief stands at 1.06 meters in height and 0.52 meters in length. It is currently displayed on the first floor, in the west section of the museum²².

The relief captures a delicate and intimate moment in which the winged goddess Nike bends down to adjust her sandal—a gesture both graceful and deeply human. This artwork exemplifies the “rich style” of the late 5th century BC, characterized by intricate drapery that clings to the body like wet fabric, revealing the underlying form. As part of the larger narrative celebrating Athenian military victories, this depiction of Nike offers a unique blend of divine elegance and relatable humanity, showcasing the artistic innovation of the period and the high level of craftsmanship achieved by Agorakritos' workshop²³.

2- Grimani Reliefs

The Original so-called Grimani reliefs, housed in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna (Fig. 10), are significant examples of classical sculpture. These reliefs reflect the artistic elegance and mythological themes characteristic of ancient Greco-Roman

²² Cortés, G. (2017). El museo de copias. in *ARQ*, (95), 12; Kieso, D. E., Weygandt, J. J., & Warfield, T. D. (2019). *Intermediate Accounting* (17th ed.). Wiley, 31.

<https://www.theacropolismuseum.gr/en/athena-nike-temple-parapet-south-slab-sandalbinder>

²³ Álvarez de Frutos, P. (2011). *Museo de la Acrópolis - Atenas: Guía para la visita*. Imprenta Rabalán S.L, 9, 10; Cortés, G. (2017). *El museo de copias*. 12.

<https://www.theacropolismuseum.gr/en/athena-nike-temple-parapet-south-slab-sandalbinder>

art. Their detailed craftsmanship and historical value make them an important part of the museum's classical collection²⁴.

The first relief depicts a lioness lying on the ground, tenderly embracing her two cubs. The scene is rich with movement and emotion, as the lioness gazes forward with a watchful expression, while the cubs gather closely around her—one lifting its head as if sensing something in the distance. The background features a natural setting, with winding rocks and trees that add depth and texture to the composition²⁵.

The Second relief portrays a pastoral scene of a ewe nurturing her lamb, gently nursing it. The ewe is depicted in a tender posture, bending lovingly toward her offspring, evoking a strong sense of maternal care. The composition includes intricate details such as a branching tree to the left, delicate floral elements, and an amphora resting on the ground. In the background, there is a structure resembling a cottage or stable, with a small window through which the head of an animal or bird—possibly symbolic—emerges. The overall scene radiates tranquility and peace²⁶.

Carved Stones

1- The Rosetta Stone

The Rosetta Stone is one of the most famous artifacts in the world and is currently housed in the British Museum in London (Fig. 11). Therefore, the Gypsoteca Hall included a copy of the stone. It was discovered by chance on July 15, 1799, by soldiers from Napoleon's army during excavation work in the town of Rosetta (modern-day Rashid) in the Nile Delta. The stone was found embedded in an old wall, and the officer in charge, Pierre-François Bouchard, recognized its historical significance²⁷.

The Rosetta Stone is made of a slab of black basalt and is a broken piece of a larger slab. It measures approximately 11 inches thick, about 3 feet 9 inches high, and 2 feet 4.5 inches wide. The stone bears a single inscription written in three scripts: Egyptian hieroglyphs (used for religious and official texts), Demotic (the everyday script used by the ancient Egyptians for daily writing and communication), and ancient Greek (the administrative language during the Ptolemaic period). The inscribed text is a royal decree issued in 196 BCE by King Ptolemy V, reflecting the support he received from the priests one year after his coronation. This decree was copied onto stone slabs and distributed to major temples across Egypt. Although the Rosetta Stone is not unique, as it was one of several copies, its importance lies in being the key to deciphering Egyptian hieroglyphs. Before its discovery, the knowledge of this script had been lost since the 4th century CE. However, thanks to the trilingual inscription

²⁴ Bencze, Á. (2017). Egy hullámzó világ képei: Reális, irreális, szürreális tájképek a korai római császárkorban. *Ókor*, 16 (1), 70.

²⁵ Ibid, 4. kép

²⁶ Bencze, Á. (2017). Egy hullámzó világ képei: Reális, irreális, 5. kép

²⁷ Napoleon led a campaign in Egypt between 1798 and 1801 with the aim of expanding his influence in the Eastern Mediterranean. On July 15, 1799, French soldiers accidentally discovered the Rosetta Stone while constructing an annex to a fort near Rosetta. The stone had been embedded in an ancient wall. Officer Pierre-François Bouchard realized its importance. After the French were defeated, the stone was transferred to Britain under the terms of the Treaty of Alexandria (1801), arriving in Portsmouth in February 1802.

British Museum (1922). *The Rosetta Stone*. London, the British Museum, 1.

and the scholars' understanding of ancient Greek, comparisons could be made. Thomas Young made initial progress, but the greatest credit goes to the French scholar Jean-François Champollion, who deciphered the script in 1822, drawing on his knowledge of the Coptic language, a later form of ancient Egyptian²⁸.

Since 1802, the stone has been displayed in the British Museum, with the exception of a brief period during World War I when it was moved to an underground shelter at Holborn Station to protect it from air raids²⁹. The Rosetta Stone has served as a fundamental tool that opened the doors to Egyptology and helped restore an understanding of ancient Egyptian civilization, its language, and inscriptions after centuries of obscurity.

2- Stela of Canopus Decree in Honor of Ptolemy III

The Decree of Canopus (Fig. 12), issued during the reign of King Ptolemy III (circa 246–221 BC), is one of the oldest and most significant archaeological records from the Ptolemaic period. The decree was inscribed on a limestone stela and includes three languages: Egyptian hieroglyphs, Demotic, and Greek. It addresses important topics such as military campaigns, the administration of the kingdom, famine relief, religious practices, and documents royal donations. This decree is considered the second oldest known trilingual inscription, after the Decree of Alexandria, which enhances its historical significance and adds special value to the study of the Ptolemaic period³⁰.

The Importance of the Gypsoteca Hall in the Greco-Roman Museum

1. Exchange between Museums

Plaster casts in Gypsoteca Hall are vital tools for the exchange of artistic and cultural knowledge between museums around the world. Through international exchange agreements—such as the one established in 1867—plaster molds were shared among European museums to provide access to classical artworks for those unable to travel to view the originals³¹. In this way, plaster casts allow visitors the opportunity to experience world-renowned artworks without the need to travel to their original locations³².

The Greco-Roman Museum in Alexandria acquired a distinguished collection of plaster casts through collaborations with various prominent museums across Europe

²⁸ Schoville, K. (2001). The Rosetta Stone in historical perspective. *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, 12(1), 1, 2; Sharpe, S. (1871). *The Rosetta Stone, in hieroglyphics and Greek; with translations, and an explanation of the hieroglyphical characters; and followed by an appendix of kings' names*. London: John Russell Smith, VI; Ray, J. (2007). *The Rosetta Stone and the rebirth of ancient Egypt*. Harvard University, 3,4; British Museum. (1922). *The Rosetta Stone*, 2- 4.

²⁹ Ray, J. (2007). *The Rosetta Stone and the rebirth of ancient Egypt*, 4.

³⁰ Sharpe, S. (1870). *The decree of Canopus, in hieroglyphics and Greek: With translations, and an explanation of the hieroglyphical characters*. John Russell Smith, IV – VIII; Ray, J. (2007). *The Rosetta Stone and the rebirth of ancient Egypt*, 45.

³¹ Alves, A. N., Carreira, A. M., & Frade, M. (2021). *A “Arte” do Gesso – Entre a criação e a réplica – Estudo e preservação / The “Art” of Plaster – Between Creation and Reproduction – Study and Preservation: Livro de resumos*. Faculdade de Belas-Artes da Universidade de Lisboa, 7; Risdonne, V., Hubbard, C., López Borges, V. H., & Theodorakopoulos, C. (2022). Materials and Techniques for the Coating of Nineteenth-century Plaster Casts, 189.

³² DiSalvo, L. (2012). Plaster cast collections from the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition in context: Examining culturally determined significance through environment and time. *Material Culture Review*, (74-75), 131, 132.

and North Africa. These plaster replicas were meticulously crafted from original masterpieces housed in renowned institutions such as the National Archaeological Museum of Athens, the Cyrene Museum in Libya, the Zappeion Mansion in Athens, the Museo di Scultura Antica Giovanni Barracco in Italy, the British Museum in London, the Acropolis Museum in Athens, the Kunsthistorisches and Museum in Vienna. This international exchange of casts allowed the museum to bring exemplary classical artworks to Alexandria, making them accessible to local audiences and scholars. The presence of these casts not only enriched the museum's collections but also strengthened its role as a major center for the study and appreciation of Greco-Roman art in the Mediterranean region³³.

2. The Educational Role

Plaster casts in The Gypsoteca Hall have significantly contributed to enhancing cooperation between museums, art centers, and academic institutions, serving as a central educational tool in art schools³⁴. This is clearly reflected in the Gypsoteca Hall of the Greco-Roman Museum, which features plaster casts that expanded the scope of academic study and cultural exchange between museums. These casts made ancient masterpieces accessible to all, thereby enriching global artistic knowledge.

- **Art Education**

International plaster replicas are used to teach sculpture and drawing techniques. They enable students to closely study the intricate details of Greek and Roman artworks³⁵. The Gypsoteca Hall in the Graeco-Roman Museum serves as a dynamic space for educational and creative activities, regularly hosting specialized art workshops in various fields, most notably drawing, sculpture, and visual arts. These workshops aim to foster direct engagement with the displayed plaster models, offering visitors, especially students and emerging artists, a unique opportunity to study the intricate details of classical works and reproduce them using contemporary artistic approaches. Such initiatives contribute to the development of technical skills and artistic appreciation, while also bridging classical heritage with modern artistic practices, thereby enhancing the museum's educational and cultural role (Figs. 13, 14).

- **Supporting Academic Studies in Classical Arts**

Plaster casts in The Gypsoteca Hall play a crucial role in education, particularly in the fields of art, history, and archaeology. They serve as valuable tools for students and scholars to study and appreciate the details of classical sculptures and architectural works, often replicating originals that are too fragile or inaccessible for direct examination. Plaster casts allow for hands-on learning experiences, where students can analyze the proportions, textures, and techniques used by ancient artists. Furthermore, plaster casts provide a way to preserve and share important cultural

³³ Barbati-Vartsou, E. (2016). *National Archaeological Museum: 150 years*; Blanco Freijeiro, A. (1978). *Arte griego: La época helenística*, 390; Killerich, B. (2017). *The head posture of Alexander the Great*, 9; Bencze, Á. (2017). *Egy hullámozó világ képei: Réális, irreális, szürreális tájképek a korai római császárkorban*, 12; Bencze, Á. (2017). *Egy hullámozó világ képei*, 4-5 kép; British Museum. (1922). *The Rosetta Stone*, 1; <https://www.zappeion.gr/en/zappeion-tour/statues.html>

³⁴ Thea Stevens. (2018-2019). The Plaster Cast Collection of the Glasgow School of Art: History, Aura and Experience. *Journal of the Scottish Society for Art History*, Vol. 23, 24-26; Rieppel, L. (2015). Plaster cast publishing in nineteenth-century paleontology. *History of Science*, 53(4), 457.

³⁵ Lores-Chavez, I. (2023). The Plaster Cast and the Intimacy of the Studio, 120, 121.

heritage. They offer an opportunity for people who cannot visit the original sites to engage with and learn about the masterpieces of the past. These casts are also vital in the restoration and documentation of historical objects that may have been damaged or lost over time, enabling future generations to study them. In essence, plaster casts bridge the gap between the past and present, offering an interactive and detailed approach to learning that enhances the understanding of classical art and its significance in our world today³⁶.

- **Documentation and Preservation**

Plaster casts in The Gypsoteca Hall have contributed to documenting the decorative and architectural details of original works that may be subject to wear or destruction over time. For example, the Parthenon Frieze displayed at the Acropolis Museum in Athens presents missing details from the original version, allowing visitors to closely examine aspects that have been affected by environmental factors or the passage of time. Additionally, the use of replicated copies of the zodiac in the Temple of Dendera in Qena is another example of how these casts enhance understanding and research, providing an opportunity to study and document the intricate details of the engravings and decorations that adorn ancient temples, thus helping preserve and document cultural heritage for future generations. There are also cases where the original version has been destroyed, making the plaster cast the only remaining reference, such as the surviving plaster cast of the 16th-century Christian Lubeck inscription at the Victoria and Albert Museum, which represents a prominent example of how plaster casts are used to preserve works that cannot be restored or have been completely lost³⁷.

- **Contribution to Archaeological Research**

The Gypsoteca Hall assists archaeologists in studying and analyzing sculptures without handling the often fragile or inaccessible originals. Plaster casts provide students and researchers with the opportunity to examine artworks and architecture from various cultures and civilizations. For example, in the Carnegie Architecture Hall, plaster casts are used as educational tools to instruct students in architecture and applied arts, while also giving the public insight into the artists' experimental phases of working with plaster to achieve artistic perfection.

- **Expanding Cultural Accessibility**

Plaster casts in The Gypsoteca Hall play an essential role in advancing scientific research and academic studies, particularly in fields such as archaeology, art history, and cultural heritage preservation. By providing accurate replicas of ancient sculptures, reliefs, and inscriptions, these casts allow researchers to examine and analyze intricate details that may be otherwise inaccessible due to the fragility or inaccessibility of the original works. For instance, the casts of iconic works like the

³⁶ Torello, F. (2022). *Plaster casts, augmented: Architecture in the museum and the impact of digital media*, 188, 189; Barbati-Vartsou, E. (2016). *National Archaeological Museum: 150 years*; Blanco Freijeiro, A. (1978). *Arte griego: La época helenística*, 390; Killerich, B. (2017). *The head posture of Alexander the Great*, 9; Bencze, Á. (2017). *Egy hullámozó világ képei: Réális, irreális, szürreális tájképek a korai római császárságban*, 12; Bencze, Á. (2017). *Egy hullámozó világ képei*, 4-5 kép; British Museum (1922). *The Rosetta Stone*, 1.

³⁷ Risdonne, V., Hubbard, C., López Borges, V. H., & Theodorakopoulos, C. (2022). *Materials and Techniques for the Coating of Nineteenth-century Plaster Casts*, 186.

فادوس، عزت ذكي (2005)، *آثار مصر في العصور اليونانية والرومانية*، دار المعرفة الجامعية، الإسكندرية، 306.

"Aphrodite of Cyrene" or the "Nike Adjusting Her Sandal" offer scholars a unique opportunity to study the original artistic techniques, proportions, and cultural significance of these masterpieces up close. Furthermore, plaster casts serve as invaluable tools for comparative studies, enabling researchers to explore connections between different civilizations and art periods. In addition, when original artifacts are lost or damaged, plaster casts act as crucial references for preserving historical knowledge, as demonstrated by the Rosetta Stone or the Canopus Decree. These replicas enhance academic research by providing tangible evidence of cultural practices, language, and artistry, ultimately contributing to the ongoing preservation and understanding of our shared cultural heritage³⁸.

- **Art appreciation**

Plaster casts in The Gypsoteca Hall play a significant role in enhancing art appreciation by providing a visual and tactile experience for visitors, allowing them to explore the details of original works in a tangible way. Plaster casts are a central tool in art education, as they enable students and artists to gain a deeper understanding of classical techniques and styles.

3. Overcoming Distance

Plaster casts in The Gypsoteca Hall play a vital role in facilitating visitors' access to original artworks that may be located in distant places or surrounded by restrictions. At the Greek and Roman Museum in Alexandria, these casts provide a unique opportunity to enjoy viewing classical pieces of art that represent a rich cultural heritage. Through these casts, visitors can interact with statues such as the "Poseidon or Zeus" and the "Aphrodite of Cyrene," as well as heads of statues like the "Head of Alexander the Great," directly, without needing to travel to museums in Athens or London. These casts are not merely accurate replicas of the originals; they also contribute to saving time and distance, allowing visitors to explore the masterpieces of Greek and Roman art without leaving Alexandria. They can study the fine details of these pieces, and through these casts, the educational and cultural benefits increase, offering visitors a more accessible and convenient experience of classical culture³⁹.

Conclusion

The Graeco-Roman Museum of Alexandria, founded in 1892, is dedicated to preserving and displaying Greek and Roman artifacts from Egyptian history. After renovations in 2015 and 2018, it added new spaces, including the Gypsoteca Hall, to enhance its focus on classical art and education.

The Gypsoteca Hall is the only place in Egypt showcasing an extensive collection of plaster casts of classical masterpieces. These replicas, many from international

³⁸ Barbati-Vartsou, E. (2016). *National Archaeological Museum: 150 years*; Blanco Freijeiro, A. (1978). *Arte griego: La época helenística*, 390; Killerich, B. (2017). *The head posture of Alexander the Great*, 9; Bencze, Á. (2017). *Egy hullámzó világ képei: Reális, irreális, szürreális tájképek a korai római császárkorban*, 12; Bencze, Á. (2017). *Egy hullámzó világ képei*, 4-5 kép; British Museum (1922). *The Rosetta Stone*, 1.

<https://www.zappeion.gr/en/zappeion-tour/statues.html>

³⁹ Barbati-Vartsou, E. (2016). *National Archaeological Museum: 150 years*; Blanco Freijeiro, A. (1978). *Arte griego: La época helenística*, 390; Bard, J., & Torello, F. (2012). *Plaster Recast: Augmented Reality as Medium for Craft-Focused Pedagogy*. In *Dialectic VI: Craft – The Art of Making Architecture*. University of Utah, School of Architecture, 38, 39.

museums, provide visitors with a rare opportunity to view famous works typically scattered across the world, promoting cultural exchange.

Plaster casts, dating back to ancient Greece and Rome, were revived in the 16th and 17th centuries and became important educational tools by the 19th century. Despite a decline in the 20th century, recent decades have seen renewed interest due to their educational and preservation value.

The Gypsoteca Hall exemplifies international collaboration, with plaster casts acquired through partnerships with museums in Europe and North Africa. This exchange has made classical masterpieces more accessible, preserving cultural heritage and sharing it with a broader audience.

The Gypsoteca Hall has contributed significantly to the museum's educational mission. Plaster casts are used in art schools to teach sculpture, drawing, and art history, offering hands-on learning opportunities and a tactile understanding of classical art.

Plaster casts in The Gypsoteca Hall have been essential in supporting academic research in art history, archaeology, and classical studies. They allow scholars to study fragile or inaccessible originals and help preserve classical art for future generations.

Plaster casts in The Gypsoteca Hall also serve in documenting and preserving historical artifacts. They create replicas of damaged or lost works, like the Rosetta Stone and the Canopus Decree, enabling ongoing study even when originals are no longer fully intact.

The Gypsoteca Hall aids archaeological research by allowing scholars to examine sculptures and artifacts without handling fragile originals. The casts enable deeper study of artistic techniques, cultural significance, and architectural designs, enhancing understanding of ancient civilizations.

Plaster casts in The Gypsoteca Hall expand cultural accessibility by allowing people to engage with artworks that might be inaccessible due to distance or restrictions. Visitors to the Gypsoteca Hall in Alexandria can view masterpieces without traveling, broadening the educational experience for a wider audience.

Plaster casts in The Gypsoteca Hall enhance art appreciation by providing a tangible way for visitors to explore original artworks in detail. This tactile experience deepens understanding of classical techniques and promotes greater appreciation of ancient civilizations' artistic achievements.

Plaster casts in The Gypsoteca Hall overcome distance barriers by allowing visitors to engage with artworks that would otherwise be inaccessible. The Gypsoteca Hall provides a unique opportunity to experience Greek and Roman art without the need for international travel.

The Gypsoteca Hall boasts a great diversity in its exhibits, featuring an impressive collection of plaster casts sourced from various museums across Europe and the Arab world. These exhibits range from full statues and sculpted reliefs to busts, reflecting a wide variety of artistic forms and geographical regions. The hall stands out as a center for cultural and educational exchange.

The Gypsoteca hall should be replicated in other museums as it is an important step towards enhancing cultural and artistic understanding. It allows visitors and researchers the opportunity to interact with accurate replicas of artworks that may be difficult to access. Moreover, replicating this model in other museums can help

preserve cultural heritage and provide an effective educational tool for students and art enthusiasts.

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Figures



Fig. 1: A student field trip to the Gipsoteca
<https://web.facebook.com/GraecoRomanMuseumAlex/photos>



Fig. 2: Statue of Poseidon or Zeus.
<https://www.namuseum.gr/en/collection/klasiki-periodos-3/>



Fig. 3: Statue of “Aphrodite of Cyrene”.

Blanco Freijeiro, A. (1978). *Arte griego: La época helenística*. Madrid: Historia 16, fig. 231.



Fig. 4: Bust of Athina at Zappeion Mansion.

<https://www.zappeion.gr/en/zappeion-tour/statues.html>



Fig. 5: Male head of Alexander the Great.

<https://www.museobarracco.it/en/opera/testa-maschile-alessandro-magno>



Fig. 6: Marble head of Alexander the Great.

https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G_1872-0515-1



Fig. 7: Head of the goddess Aphrodite.
<https://web.facebook.com/GraecoRomanMuseumAlex/photos>



Fig. 8: Head of Hadrian.
<https://web.facebook.com/GraecoRomanMuseumAlex/photos>



Fig. 9: Nike Adjusting Her Sandal Relief.

Álvarez de Frutos, P. (2011). *Museo de la Acrópolis - Atenas: Guía para la visita*. Imprenta Rabalán S.L, 9.



Fig. 10: Grimani reliefs.

Blanco Freijeiro, A. (1978). *Arte griego: La época helenística*. Madrid: Historia 16, 4-5. kép

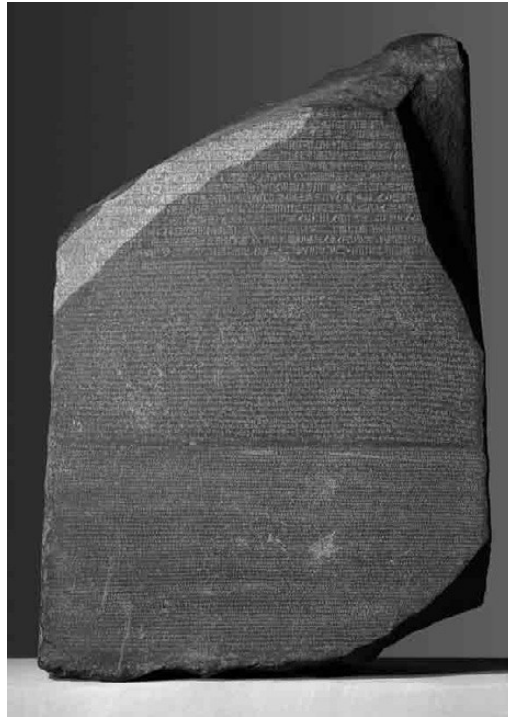


Fig. 11: The Rosetta Stone.

Ray, J. (2007). *The Rosetta Stone and the rebirth of ancient Egypt*, fig. 1.

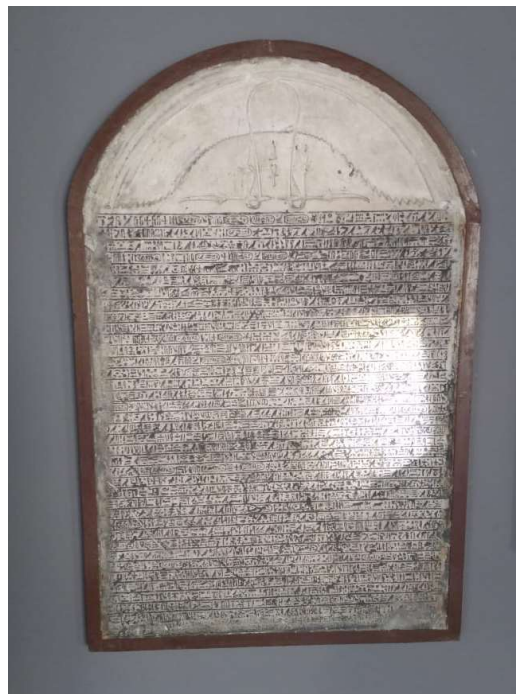


Fig. 12: Stela of Canopus Decree in Honor of Ptolemy III.

<https://web.facebook.com/GraecoRomanMuseumAlex/photos>



Fig. 13: A student field trip to the Gipsoteca
<https://web.facebook.com/GraecoRomanMuseumAlex/photos>



Fig. 14: A student field trip to the Gipsoteca
<https://web.facebook.com/GraecoRomanMuseumAlex/photos>