

Conservation conclusion

The project started in Oct 2009 and throughout the year we have worked with and round the College on a day to day basis; meetings and points of contact were constant on site and at the workshop, which enabled all physical works to be completed by the end of 2010.

The Conservation works as documented in the reports are the culmination of the first phase, successfully carrying out conservation work to a total of 113 wall frieze plaster panels and free standing plaster casts.

The Conservation Team who carried out the works are trained and experienced Sculpture Conservators: Graciela Ainsworth Sculpture Conservation:
Senior Conservator Graciela Ainsworth, Iain Fox in charge of financial, administrative aspects and the lifting and shifting of the Casts;
Sylwia Mosko headed the team on site, with Mairi Harland, Sophie Woerhling, Will Collier, Eric Waanders, Sergio Merida, Jonathan Leburn, Csilla Karsay, Yvonne McClement and Jonathan Kemp.

The works as described in the final reports began with an initial investigative survey from scaffold access, tests and analysis were then carried out to determine the most appropriate methods for carrying out surface cleaning which was carried out to reveal the actual condition of the surface coatings, structure and fixings where possible.

The conservation involved works to ensure structural integrity of the free standing casts whilst displayed on the moveable plinths, which included the investigation of the use of the original plinths regularly moved about the building uneven floors. It was found that many of the castors were in fact unsafe and actually caused more vibration damage to the pieces, therefore works were carried out to the plinths by others. Our work was to safely lift and transport the Casts to safe ground level display, followed by the eventual lift back onto the repaired plinths, this included designing new softening under the Casts to lessen the vibration.

We were very aware whilst working in our ' Temporary Conservation Studio' built on site in the ECA Sculpture Court; that the Casts are often moved and used, as has taken place over the years, in a working Art College. We hope that through the conservation work carried out on site that this will promote more respect and sensitive storage, use and transportation of the Plaster Casts, through gaining more knowledge of the pieces.

These Final Conservation reports that document in detail the works carried out, the specific conservation materials and treatment used, and analysis along with photographic records of the works completed to the casts. These reports and the accompanying photographic documentation will be used as reference for the ECA and as part of the monitoring for any possible deterioration of the casts in the future. All Analysis reports have been given to the ECA as the project has progressed in hard copy and electronically through the ECA intranet, as with the Thermography report, Mortar report, all Digital X Rays, and photographic records when requested.

The public interface and training throughout this year has been important to establish a future maintenance programme with volunteers and students, and to establish a feeling of respect and appreciation of the casts and of the conservation work.

In their past the casts have been cared for, but in the busy working environment of the Art College the plaster casts became unfashionable and less used: unwanted, cumbersome items that were taking up valuable space. As a result, the caring of the large casts has proved very difficult to sustain.

Analysis has been the key to helping understand the history of the Plaster Casts: Historical records kept at the ECA were helpful in the analysis of the surface coatings, in particular the documents from Minutes of Evidence 1903 prior to the Casts being moved to the ECA one document reads: 'most of the casts are very dirty, but all the important ones that are being copied are kept clean' ... 'how are they kept clean?' ... 'latterly we just washed them, and put on a coating of size and chalk' ... 'was that put on when they were new?' ... 'no I am sorry to say they were painted' ... 'when I have the opportunity, I take good care to have as much of the coat taken off as possible' ... There were also records of more recent repair work whilst at the ECA, which included the application of over-paint and pigmented wax to many casts over the last 20 years.

The works we have carried out were as we recommended in our tender of 2009, all this information has been invaluable for the duration of this conservation project and will be invaluable for the future records and future maintenance and monitoring of the collection.

The Casts at the ECA are to continue to be displayed as an integral part of the building, being accessible for staff, students and the general public, with certain casts being available as a teaching resource for the arts students. Our approach to the conservation works with Museum standards will ensure that the condition of the casts is suitable for their purposes.

The project also involved several Power-point talks for Volunteers NADFAS workshops, in-house ECA/UoE Conservation workshops, Children's days, a lecture that formed part of the Architectural Conservation Master Classes organised by Ruxandra, and a Symposium on patina organised by Margaret Stewart.

The aesthetics of the casts, post-conservation, are such that they will be more easily recognised as highly significant and respected pieces; this will in its own right reduce risk of accidental damage and thus contribute to the preservation of the casts. The purpose of the conservation works however, was not merely aesthetic. Recognising the fact that the ECA casts are to remain in a working building, being accessible to staff, students and members of the public, and to be displayed, used and moved to an extent which is perhaps alien to the environment of museums and galleries, the aim of the conservation work was to ensure that the structural integrity of the casts allows them to be fit for these purposes.

The Regular Maintenance:

For the future the regular maintenance could now be carried out by the trained NADFAS team that spent many mornings with our Conservation team, learning about the Casts prior to dry cleaning the Casts.

Future Monitoring:

Future monitoring of the panels following this conservation work will involve regular close visual inspections. If significant cracks re-appear in either the wall frieze panels or large free standing Casts, this would again be the time to contact a Sculpture Conservation company skilled in this work to look through the final report and all photographic documentation, with the possibility of having to consider taking down the frieze panel, or lift the free standing cast for a more thorough structural conservation regime to be undertaken.