# Cast Courts

**Intro**

**NB the Cast Courts are huge and you could easily spend hours here. This is a very brief intro to the highlights and my subjective must sees.**

 V & A first curator John Charles Robinson travels across Europe and is awestruck by the West Front and door of the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostella. Insists that a replica be made for display at the then South Kensington Museum. Galleries open in 1873 and represent one of the greatest collections of replicas anywhere in the world.

Courts created to inspire and educate. The average man or woman no longer needed to visit Rome to see Trajan’s Column or Florence to see Michael Angelo’s David.

Route for all of this prepared by Henry Cole. Who negotiates an international treaty  in 1867 between European princes that agrees to share works for copying.

What is there to see? Three spaces. Weston Cast Court (David etc). Ruddock Family Cast Court (Trajan’s Column), Chitral Nirmal Sethia Gallery(Arcade between explaining process of casting). Floor by Women of Woking jail! Size of courts dictated by the two largest objects. 35 metre high (split in half) Trajan Column and 41 metre wide Portico de la Gloria. Vast array of objects including but very roughly composed of Renaissance (Italian and N European) Art and Medieval sculpture and early Anglo Saxon crosses.

**What is a cast?**

**NB. Excellent illustrations and models to explain all of this are in the Chitral Nirmal Sethia Gallery.**

**Plaster cast.** Mould made from either flexible material (eg clay, wax, gutta-percha (Malay treewax!) or from rigid material (eg plaster). Material applied to surface of the object to be cast to produce negative image.  This is more complex than it sounds. For really detailed objects many hundreds of moulds will be obtained that need to a) obtain fine detail of the object, b) fit exactly to neighbouring moulds. Moulding process also has to ensure no damage is caused to the original artwork.  All of the pieces then fitted together in a “mother mould”. This produces the complete negative image. Liquid plaster then poured into the mould and the copy produced.

**Electrotyping.**Mould made from wax, plaster, gutta-percha (today silicon rubber). Mould released producing accurate negative image. Mould painted with metallic solution (usually silver) to make it conductive. Copper wires attached to the surface and the entire mould suspended in a vat of copper sulphate. Electric current switched on which passes through the solution. Positively charged copper ions are drawn towards the negatively charged mould. Once enough copper is drawn into the mould and the copy can support its own weight, it is removed. Various additional processes can be employed to add decoration (eg electroplating to make look like silver, electrogilding to make look like gold).

**Selected highlights.**

**Michaelangelo’s David.**Original created from 1501-4 designed to stand on the roofline of the Duomo in Florence. Never happened and instead installed in the Pallazzo Vecchio. Moved in the 19thC to the Acadamia where it can still be seen today. Interesting point and good highlight to illustrate value of casts. In 1993 the original David was attacked by a lunatic with a hammer which damaged the toes of the statue. Restoration only achieved because exact casts exist. This cast donated by Queen Victoria to the V and A in 1857. One of the very first objects to be installed at the new Museum. 1500 piece moulds used to create the cast.

Around the back of the statue is the fig leaf produced to conceal nudity in he 19thC to prevent delicate visitors suffering a fit of the vapours! Early photos of the original David show fig leaf in place.

**Trajan’s Column.**Initially erected C AD110, to commemorate Emperor Trajan’s victory over the Dacian’s in AD 101-2 and AD 105-6. Original carved from marble and still stands in Rome. If unfurled (!) it would be 200m long, depicts 155 scenes and comprises over 2,500 figures. Plaster moulds initially taken 1861-2 for Emp Napoleon III. Later electrotype copies constructed and these used as patterns from which these are made. So this is a copy of a copy. Cast court height set at 25 meters to accomodate T’sC.   Brick cores constructed around which the casts are wrapped. (Visible under the lower section) Lettering used on base is “Trajan” typeface. Widely copied and used in the late 19thC and still inspiring modern typefaces today. Original column badly damaged by 20th/21st C pollution. This cast shows better detail than the original.

**Portico de la Gloria.**East front and portico of Cathedral of Santiago de Compostella .Constructed late 12th C under patronage of Ferdinand II of Leon, executed by sculptor Maestro Mateo. Brief description; 3 arches, central monumental tympanum. Scenes show St John’s depiction of the apocalypse, triumphant Christ at centre surrounded by the 24 elders of he Apocalypse.  Cast made by Domenic Bracciani on the directions of Henry Cole. Bracciani had to work very hard to convince the Cathedral authorities that he would cause no damage...and he didn’t.  Casting completed in just over 2 months! Further casts taken from this one and displayed in Madrid and at the World Expo in Barcelona in 1929.

**Gates Of Paradise.**Doors produced by Lorenzo Ghiberti 1425-1452 for Eastern Doors of the Baptistry in Florence. Widely held up as being an early inspiration for the entire Italian Renaissance movement. Shows that Ghiberti had totally understood idea of linear perspective. Electrotype produced by Giovanni Franchi and son. Gutta-Percha used for initial mouldings. Subsequent plaster moulds taken to Franchi’s workshop in Clerkenwell. Brief description. 10 panels depicting Old Testament scenes chronological order from top left to bottom right,  Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah, Abraham, Jacob and Esau, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, David, and Solomon and Sheba. MichaelAngelo gives the doors the unofficial nickname “Gates of Paradise”

**Royal Tombs.**Less spectacular but from an English History perspective, fascinating. Casts of tombs of Henry II and Richard the Lionheart taken from the Abbey of Fontevrault. Gives us the best impression of what these early medieval kings looked like.

**Anglo Saxon crosses.**Many of these casts now provide much better detail than from the originals that have been subject to the ravages of pollution in the last 150 years or so. Some of these are very early 6th-8th century. These are examples of the very few objects that survive from the time of Bede and even Sutton Hoo.  Check out writhing intertwined creatures reminiscent of those on Sutton Hoo buckle etc.

**Also worth knowing about,**

**Pepys Cup.**Original donated to the Clothworkers Livery Company by Samuel Pepys in 1677. One of the best examples of English Baroque Silver. Moulded in 29 seperate sections. Level in detail of electrotype amazing. Shows Pepys inscription at base.

**Milton Shield.**Original produced by Elkington and Co, artist Leonard Morel-Ladeuil, to commemorate 200th anniversary of the publication of Milton’s Paradise Lost. V and A buys original in 1868 for £2000, (£1.5 M in today’s money!) V and A start producing Electrotype copies for use in its art schools and also put copies on sale at 12 guineas. Good money making venture.