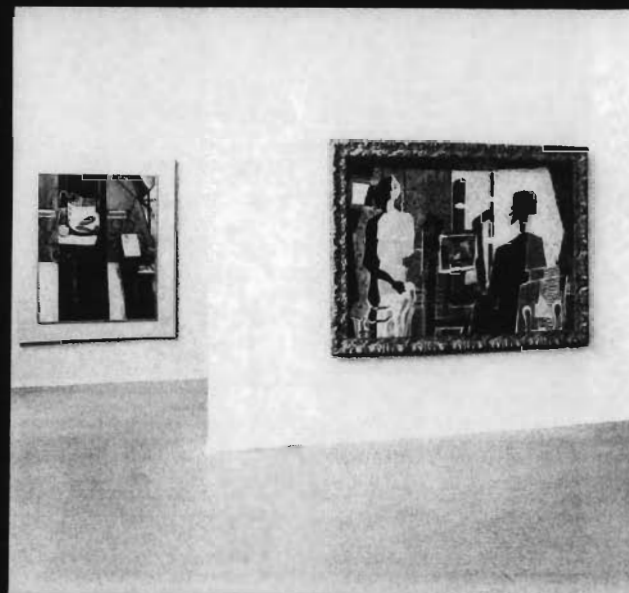


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EXHIBITING CONTRADICTION

Essays on the Art Museum in the United States

Alan Wallach



CHAPTER THREE

The American Cast Museum: An Episode in the History of the Institutional Definition of Art

Introduction

Historians have long been aware that a visit to an art museum in the United States during the years between 1874 and 1914 often involved the perusal of a collection of casts and reproductions, but they have made very little of this remarkable fact.¹ During this period, sculptural replicas were the order of the day, the means by which the museum-going public was to acquire the benefits of a higher civilization. Casts were admired, studied, judged in terms of their quality as casts, and only rarely criticized. In 1898 Samuel Parrish, proprietor of the Southampton Art Gallery (today the Parrish Art Museum), argued that cast collections were "the real treasures" of the great museums of New York, Boston, Chicago, and Washington. In Parrish's view, collections of "modern pictures," although "interesting and valuable," did not compare in educational worth with "plaster reproductions of the antique and Renaissance sculpture, those masterpieces of the genius of man at its highest period of development in the world of art."² Parrish's comments echoed a commonplace opinion of the time. If we take his comments seriously—and I believe we should—they pose a historical problem. Because we are now so accustomed to equating museum art with notions of originality and authenticity, the collections of plaster casts that once filled American art museums may seem to have been at best stopgaps, simulacra of "real" or "authentic" museum collections. In other words we may be too ready to understand them only in comparison with what eventually replaced them, thus missing the aesthetic and social imperatives that

prompted early museum proprietors, directors, and boards of trustees to fill elaborate and expensive museum buildings with relatively inexpensive collections of copies and reproductions. Yet the history of the creation and subsequent obliteration of cast collections in American art museums forms an important part of the history of the concept of art itself: for it was only through the institutionalization of the polarity between original and copy, authentic and fake, that art became irrevocably associated with notions of originality and authenticity.

The Art Museum in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction

The history of American art museums before 1900 is, with one or two exceptions, a history of collections of casts and reproductions. Although museums may have possessed extensive holdings of other works—often examples of modern (i.e., nineteenth-century) painting and sculpture—the heart and soul of the public art museum, the works that provided it with its *raison d'être*, were assemblages of casts of famous antique sculptures: the Parthenon frieze, figures from the Parthenon pediments, the *Discobolus*, the *Belvedere Torso*, the *Apollo Belvedere*, the *Dancing Faun*, the *Laocoön* (fig. 3.1), the *Borghese Warrior*, the *Dying Gladiator*, the *Seated Boxer*, the *Uffizi Wrestlers*, the *Apoxyomenos*, Praxiteles' *Hermes* and *Dionysos*, the *Niobe Group*, the *Spinario*, the *Capitoline Venus*, the *Venus de Medici*, the *Venus de Milo* (fig. 3.2), the *Winged Victory* (fig. 3.3). These works were almost invariably supplemented with casts of Italian Renaissance sculpture: Ghiberti's *Gates of Paradise*; Donatello's *St. George*, bronze *David*, and reliefs from the Cantoria in Florence's Duomo; Luca della Robbia's Cantoria reliefs; Andrea della Robbia's *Visitation*; Verrocchio's *David*; Michelangelo's *David*, *Pietà*, *Moses*, *Slaves*, and Medici Tombs (fig. 3.4). Moreover, in addition to casts of antique and Renaissance sculpture, museums frequently exhibited architectural casts, casts of Assyrian, Egyptian, and medieval sculpture, electrotypes reproductions of coins and metal work, and photographs of paintings and other works of art.

That American art museums would be museums of casts and reproductions was, from the beginning, taken for granted. For example, when the Corcoran Gallery of Art opened in Washington, D.C., in 1874, it featured casts and electrotypes reproductions, and original works in marble, bronze, and ceramic.³ Predictably, the Corcoran's sculpture hall, at the back of its ground floor, included full-sized replicas of the Elgin marbles, the *Discobolus*, the *Venus de*



3.1 *Laocoön*, cast, George Walter Vincent Smith Art Museum, Springfield, Massachusetts. Photo: author.

Milo, the Medici and Capitoline Venuses, the *Laocoön*, the *Apoxyomenos*, the *Apollo Belvedere*, and dozens of other works belonging to the Louvre, the British Museum, and the Vatican Museums (see fig. 2.4). Other rooms contained copies of Renaissance sculpture, including casts of Ghiberti's *Gates of Paradise* and Michelangelo's *Slaves*. There were, in addition, electrotype repro-

ductions of ninety objects from the South Kensington Museum (mainly Renaissance goblets, beakers, ewers, and candlesticks), copies of arms and armor from the Louvre, as well as a miniature replica of the recently rebuilt Column Vendôme.⁴

Given the often dramatic disappearance of cast collections from major museums beginning shortly after 1900, we might assume that interest in cast collections declined or tapered off during the 1880s and 1890s; however, precisely the reverse is the case. For example, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts opened its doors two years after the Corcoran with twenty-five casts on loan from the Boston Athenaeum and another fifty purchased with proceeds from the sale of a large collection of original oil paintings willed to the museum by Charles Sumner.⁵ By 1879 the museum owned 614 sculptural and architectural casts and by 1890 the number had risen to 777 (fig. 3.5). Indeed, the museum boasted that its collection was the third largest in the world, surpassed only by the Royal Museum in Berlin, which possessed 2,271 casts, and the University Museum at Strasbourg, which owned 819.⁶ Moreover, like the Corcoran Gallery, the Museum of Fine Arts made sculptural casts a central feature of what might be called its iconographic program.⁷ Occupying most of the rooms on the first floor of the building at Copley Square, the cast collection provided the canonical basis, the root in classical antiquity and the Italian Renaissance, for the collection of oil paintings (mainly Italian, Dutch, modern French, and American works), prints, drawings, watercolors, coins, and crafts that visitors encountered on the second floor.⁸

Edward Robinson, the Museum of Fine Arts' curator of classical antiquities and a cast expert, played a key role in the formation and expansion of other cast collections during the closing years of the century. Robinson was responsible for the selection, purchase, and installation of a collection of casts at the Slater Memorial Museum, a part of the Norwich (Connecticut) Free Academy (figs. 3.6, 3.7). According to Henry Watson Kent, the Slater's first curator and, later, director of education at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Slater "was to be entirely a museum of reproductions, but of reproductions treated with the gravity and respect due their great originals."⁹ The collection at the Slater Memorial Museum, which is still intact, exerted an influence far out of proportion to its size. Charles Eliot Norton, professor of art history at Harvard, and America's leading disciple of Ruskin, gave the keynote address at the museum's opening on 22 November 1888, which was attended by a host of luminaries from the New England worlds of art, education, and philanthropy.¹⁰ In



3.2 *Venus de Milo*, cast, George Walter Vincent Smith Art Museum, Springfield, Massachusetts. Photo: author.

3.3 *Winged Victory*, Parthenon Pediment Figures (*The Three Graces*) and Section of the Parthenon Frieze, casts, Slater Memorial Museum, Norwich, Connecticut. Photo: author.

3.4 Michelangelo, Lorenzo de' Medici tomb, cast, George Walter Vincent Smith Art Museum, Springfield, Massachusetts. Photo: author.



3.5 T. E. Moss, Copywork, *Old Boston Museum Interior as Seen in Back Bay*, ca. 1895. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

3.6 View, Slater Memorial Museum, Norwich, Connecticut. Photo: author.

3.7 View, Slater Memorial Museum, Norwich, Connecticut. Photo: author.

1891 William A. Slater, the museum's benefactor, arranged for a special drawing room car to convey members of the Metropolitan Museum's special committee on casts, and a number of other guests—Andrew Carnegie was one—to Norwich where they spent the afternoon inspecting the museum's collection.¹¹ The Metropolitan's special committee included Augustus Saint-Gaudens, Stanford White, and Professor Allan Marquand (later an expert on the art of the della Robbias). Appointed in 1890 by the museum's board of trustees, it had within a few years raised almost \$80,000 toward the expansion of the museum's hitherto relatively modest collection of casts. With Edward Robinson guiding the committee and acting as its special agent, the Metropolitan purchased two thousand casts including, in Calvin Tompkins's words, "the principal masterworks of Egyptian, Greek, Roman, and Renaissance sculpture, together with scale models of the Hypostyle Hall at Karnak, the Parthenon,

the Pantheon, the Cathedral of Notre Dame, and other architectural monuments."¹² Kent, working in consultation with Robinson, installed the collection in 1894 in the Metropolitan's recently completed Wing C, which was entirely given over to the exhibition of casts.¹³

Having enjoyed Robinson's expert tutelage, Kent oversaw, between 1894 and 1906, the purchase and installation of cast collections at the Buffalo Fine Arts Academy (later the Albright Art Gallery); the Fine Arts Building of the Springfield (Massachusetts) Public Library (the installation was re-created in the late 1970s and is still in place); the Rhode Island School of Design; and, at the behest of Andrew Carnegie, who hadn't forgotten his visit in 1891 to the Slater Memorial Museum, the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh.¹⁴ Kent's activities underscore the popularity of cast collections at the turn of the century. I could perhaps endlessly cite examples—collections at colleges and universities of the period (Brown, Columbia, Cornell, Dartmouth, Harvard, Mount Holyoke, Ohio State, Princeton, Yale, etc.); at institutions such as the Valentine Museum in Richmond, Virginia (which put a large collection of casts on display in 1898); and at Samuel Parrish's Southampton Gallery of Art (which also opened in 1898)—but by now the point has been sufficiently demonstrated.¹⁵ Cast collections were not an oddity or a transient fashion but *the* central attraction of American art museums during the years between 1874 and 1905.

Cast Culture

Because of the ubiquity of cast collections, we should not be surprised that nineteenth-century commentators sometimes claimed that casts could provide an aesthetic experience equivalent or even superior to that afforded by originals. Yet the crucial historical question is not whether casts were considered comparable to originals but how critics and museums justified the exhibition of cast collections in the first place. Here we encounter not only arguments but also tacit assumptions about the importance of casts and the works of art they reproduced or represented. We encounter, in other words, an evolving art ideology in which collections of reproductions of antique art both defined and supported the larger purposes of a developing American culture. That culture now saw itself competing with the high cultures of France, England, Italy, and Germany, thereby staking its claim to the heritage of western civilization, symbolized above all by the sculpture and architecture of Greco-Roman antiquity and the Italian Renaissance.

The literature of the period overflows with appeals to the civilizing potential of the masterpieces of antique and Renaissance art. For example, in January 1870, perhaps in anticipation of the opening that year of major museums in Washington, New York, and Boston, a writer for *Appleton's Journal* set forth an argument for art museums and, implicitly, collections of casts:

A museum of art would afford us adequate instruction in the vestiges of the ancient civilizations—a solemn and beautiful teaching—it would foster *reverence*, without which man is barbarian, and obnoxious to every fine and noble sense of the difference of things. We are a raw and noisy and obtrusive people; but place one generation of us under the influence of the past, let us see something grand and beautiful, *not* made by our hands . . . and perhaps we shall feel the sweet flower of humility break through our pride, and diffuse its gracious influence over us.¹⁶

Or consider the words of Edward Robinson, reflecting in *The Nation* (1889) upon the significance of the recently opened Slater Memorial Museum:

More than once we have endeavored to impress upon our readers the importance of collections of casts and other art reproductions as factors in popular education. It is only through these that the body of our people can ever hope to become familiar with the great masterpieces of European galleries, which have had so much effect upon the taste of people among whom they exist, and might do a similar good work in this country were they only brought within reach. Doubtless there are many who join us in the wish that not only every large, but every small city might have its gallery of reproductions as well as its public library—a gallery in which children could grow up familiar with the noblest productions of Greece and Italy, in which the laborer could pass some of his holiday hours, and in which the mechanic could find the stimulus to make his own work beautiful as well as good.¹⁷

These rationales have a familiar ring: museums with their collections of casts would civilize and refine a "raw" American public, would tame "the barbarian" and enhance the lives of not only the educated middle class but also "the laborer" and "the mechanic," who would directly apply, to their work, lessons in ideal beauty learned at the museum.

The arguments put forth by Robinson and others were unabashed and relatively straightforward. Yet questions remain: why the particular focus on

Greek, Roman, and, to a somewhat lesser degree, Renaissance sculpture? What special powers did plaster replicas of such works as the *Laocoön* or the *Medici Venus* possess? Why did commentators, almost without exception, simply assume their civilizing value, their necessary contribution to what was so often denominated “popular education”?

The answer to these questions forms the basis of what I call “cast culture.” In the introduction to their study of the taste for the antique, Francis Haskell and Nicholas Penny remark that “for many centuries it was accepted by everyone with a claim to taste that the height of artistic creation had been reached in a limited number of antique sculptures.” These works constituted the canon of ancient art and served “as the only bulwark of absolute values in a world governed by capricious and frequently changing tastes.”¹⁸ As a cultural form the art museum was predicated upon European tradition. Consequently, when art museums made their appearance in Boston, New York, and Washington, D.C., there was no question that they would be temples to the same muses that presided over the Louvre and the British Museum. Cast culture arose in the United States in a society in which education remained identified, as in Europe, with the study of Greek and Latin, and classical literature and classical art were generally viewed as the unshakable foundations of learning and taste. Popular education—to which American museums at first enthusiastically dedicated themselves—did not mean a different type of education, rather it meant making available to a broader audience, on terms that can be easily imagined, not only representations or simulacra of antique and Renaissance art, but also the values and beliefs associated with it.

For these didactic purposes, then, casts were as good as, and in some respects better than, originals. With casts a museum could present the entire canon of antique sculpture. Indeed, as the architect Pierre LeBrun emphasized in 1885 in *The American Architect and Building News*, collections of casts had “a completeness and a unity not found possible in museums of originals.”¹⁹ Casts were celebrated in terms that made them virtually indistinguishable from originals. In a few instances, catalogs of cast collections brought together philological and archaeological data with a precision and sophistication that matched anything written about the originals. Edward Robinson’s catalog of Greek and Roman sculpture at the Museum of Fine Arts—first published in 1891, and extensively revised in 1896 to take into account recent archaeological findings—was a model of its kind.²⁰ Even small art museums, like the Valen-

tine, made strenuous efforts to furnish visitors with information and extensive commentaries.

Thus American art museums, at the turn of the century, stood as monuments to traditional learning and traditional concepts of civilization. The buildings’ facades, frequently adorned with replicas of canonical works and the names of canonical artists, served as fitting preambles to all that visitors would encounter within. The cast collections that filled museum galleries were neither anomalies nor stopgaps but integral to their purpose and highly compatible with their designs, providing an entirely fitting visual complement to their often elaborate Beaux Arts settings.

The Cult of the Original

As we have observed, between 1890 and 1894, the Metropolitan Museum’s special committee on casts raised almost \$80,000 to obtain, in its words, “a complete collection of casts, historically arranged, so as to illustrate the progress and development of plastic art in all epochs, and mainly in those that have influenced our civilization.”²¹ Indeed, the Metropolitan’s Hall of Casts functioned as “the very center” of the original museum building, and for a time during the 1890s the museum operated a “moulding department” in emulation of the Louvre’s Atelier de Moulage. Yet in 1906 the museum abolished the office of curator of casts, and over the next three decades the cast collection slowly disappeared from public view.²²

At about the same time that the Metropolitan was abolishing its cast department, Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts witnessed a dramatic “battle of the casts,” pitting Edward Robinson, now the museum’s director and curator of classical antiquities, against Matthew Prichard, a British student of classical art and the museum’s assistant director.²³ This rather murky “battle” resulted in Prichard’s demotion and eventual departure from the museum, and in Robinson’s resignation (he went on to become assistant director and then director of the Metropolitan). Once the smoke—or rather plaster dust—had cleared, the museum’s extensive cast collection began to fade from its galleries. In the 1910 edition of the museum’s *Handbook*, published one year after the museum’s move from Copley Square to more spacious quarters on Huntington Avenue, the description of the cast collection occupies only three of the book’s 348 pages, and it commences with the following caveat:

In looking at [the cast collection], it must be remembered that the final perfection of style in the work of great masters cannot be reproduced in plaster. The effect of this material in color, quality of surface, and response to light and shadow is very different from that of the original marble or bronze. The impression that the casts produce should be constantly corrected by reference to the collection of original ancient sculptures in the classical galleries.²⁴

What accounts for this sudden turnaround by the United States' two leading art museums? How was it that cast collections, deemed so essential to taste, to popular education, and to the study of a canonical history of art, became, almost overnight, expendable, or worse—as the passage from the Museum of Fine Arts' *Handbook* hinted—an aesthetic embarrassment?

In the United States, the cult of the original had its immediate origins in the 1880s and 1890s. As robber baron collectors began to discover their fortunes equal to the prices charged for old master paintings, Renaissance sculpture, and Greek and Roman antiquities, and as the European art market expanded, the distinction between original and fake became all-important. Connoisseurship was increasingly professionalized, in the person of either the art dealer or the freelance expert. It was at this point that such figures as Joseph Duveen and Bernard Berenson began to make their appearance on the international art scene. Not surprisingly, those most involved in the marginalization of cast collections were often directly concerned with the collecting of originals. Consider, for example, the case of Matthew Prichard. Before coming to Boston, Prichard had lived at Lewes House in Sussex, England, an establishment presided over by the eccentric antiquarian Perry Warren, scion of a wealthy Boston family and brother of Samuel Warren, president of the museum's board of trustees. Between 1894 and 1902, Prichard collaborated with Perry Warren who, during the 1890s and early 1900s, virtually took control of the European market in Greek and Roman antiquities, purchasing works for the Museum of Fine Arts' rapidly growing collection of original antique sculpture.²⁵ Upon arriving in Boston, Prichard became a close friend of the collector Isabella Stewart Gardner and took an interest in the work of her protégé, Bernard Berenson.²⁶ Immersed in a world in which artistic originality and historical authenticity counted for everything in a work of art, Prichard became the museum's most outspoken advocate for the abolition of the cast collection.

At the Metropolitan Museum, the shift to collecting only original works of art was associated with the regime ushered in by J. P. Morgan in 1904.²⁷ A collector with a gargantuan appetite, and the financial resources to match it, Morgan not only brought to the museum Roger Fry with his needed expertise in Renaissance painting; he also oversaw the museum's adoption of a new policy on collecting, spelled out in the annual report for 1905. Although in the past the museum had accepted gifts "hardly worthy of permanent display," it would in the future "rigorously exclude all which do not attain to acknowledged standards." According to the report, the museum would endeavor "to group together the masterpieces of different countries and times in such relation and sequence as to illustrate the history of art in the broadest sense, to make plain its teaching and to inspire and direct its national development."²⁸ The museum would, in other words, better perform its traditional functions through the exhibition of originals that met the highest aesthetic standards. In the brave new museum world created by Morgan and his fellow millionaires on the board of trustees, there was no room for inexpensive replicas or copies. Collecting originals may have required unprecedented sums of money—it was Morgan who told his son-in-law that the three most expensive words he knew were "unique au monde"²⁹—but money was after all simply cold cash. What it would buy was what mattered and, as Henry James noticed, at the Metropolitan, money would now purchase nothing less than greatness. At the conclusion of his unparalleled analysis of the Metropolitan's new order, James contemplated the museum's future—a future that would be secured by discarding all that was bogus and second rate: "in the geniality of the life to come [the master wrote, with his usual touch of irony] such sacrifices, though resembling those of the funeral pile of Sardanapalus, [would dwindle] to nothing."³⁰

"The Pianola of the Arts"

No one better articulated the argument against casts than the extraordinary Matthew Prichard. Concerned that the Museum of Fine Arts would continue to feature cast collections in its new building, Prichard maintained that the decision the museum made about the disposition of the casts would, in the most fundamental way, determine its future as an institution. In an essay written in December 1903, and intended to be read by the museum's board of trustees, he argued that

A museum of art, ultimately and in its widest possible activity, illustrates one attitude toward life. It contains only objects which reflect, clearly or dimly, the beauty and magnificence to which life has attained in past times. The fruits of this exalted and transcendent life are gathered within its walls, and it is the standard of this life with the noble intellectual activity it presupposes that a museum of art offers for acceptance by its visitors. In a narrower sense, yet in part performance of its wider obligation, the aim of a museum of art is to establish and maintain in the community a high standard of aesthetic taste. In performing this task it is its function to collect objects important for their aesthetic quality and to exhibit them in a way most fitted to affect the mind of the beholder.³¹

For Prichard, a cast was no match for the original work of art as a representative of the "exalted and transcendent life" of past cultures. As he later wrote Samuel Warren, president of the museum's board of trustees, a cast could not communicate the emotion produced by an original. "So true is this that the one thing possible to predicate of every cast, which might indeed be inscribed under each in a museum, is THE ORIGINAL DOES NOT LOOK LIKE THIS."³² A genuine fin de siècle aesthete, his thinking often shading into something resembling religious mysticism, Prichard put forth arguments for the aesthetic value of originals that in many instances remain current today.³³ According to Prichard, original art exhibited in the museum had no purpose other than to give pleasure:

The Museum is for the public and not for any caste or section of it, whether student, teacher, artist or artisan, but is dedicated chiefly to those who come, not to be educated, but to make its treasures their friends for life and their standards of beauty. Joy, not knowledge, is the aim of contemplating a painting by Turner or Dupré's *On the Cliff*, nor need we look at a statue or a coin for aught else than inspiration and the pleasure of exercising our faculties of perception. It is in this sense, furthermore, that they are accepted by those who visit our galleries, in accordance with the teaching of Aristotle, who recognized that the direct aim of art is the pleasure derived from a contemplation of the perfect.³⁴

Casts were, by contrast, "the pianola of the arts," "trite reproductions such as is the stock in trade of every ready-made museum of art," nothing but "data mechanically produced"; only "our originals are works of art." To exhibit casts

"would be to put them frankly on a level with works of art" and thus degrade originals. For the museum to succeed in its purpose—and it should be noted that in Prichard's writings its purpose was being substantially revised—its new "galleries should be freed of casts." Only then would it be "a gem in a fair setting—a museum of works of art."³⁵

Boston's "battle of the casts" thus carried implications that went far beyond the question of the relative value of originals and copies. Would the museum be devoted to education or to aesthetic pleasure? Would it serve the needs of students and artists, or would it appeal to a public capable of deriving enjoyment from contemplation of "the perfect"? As Eileen Hooper-Greenhill has observed, the art museum was, from the beginning, "an apparatus with two deeply contradictory functions: that of the elite temple of the arts, and that of a utilitarian instrument for democratic education."³⁶ Any institution with a sufficient number of casts, any "ready-made museum" in Prichard's scathing formulation, could convey knowledge, could educate the public in a canonical history of art. Thus, for example, John Cotton Dana attracted popular audiences to the newly acquired cast collection at the Springfield Public Library with an ambitious educational program of lectures and drawing classes, and on one occasion even issued "a special invitation to street railway men [which] brought out 150."³⁷ But education, particularly of this sort, was hardly what Prichard and others had in mind for the Museum of Fine Arts or the Metropolitan Museum. Indeed, only a very few museums—the largest, the best endowed—were capable of upholding the highest standards of taste, which were now increasingly identified with the display of originals.

Of course, awareness of the difference between original and copy had been present all along. Beginning in the sixteenth century casts, replicas, and prints had whetted the appetites of travelers to Italy who, according to Haskell and Penny, "agreed that the reality [of the originals] far surpassed the copies on which they had been brought up."³⁸ Unsurprisingly, nineteenth-century artists frequently insisted on the superiority of originals over copies. Thomas Eakins, writing home from Paris in 1866, described how on his initial visit to the Louvre he went first to see the statues: "they are made of real marble and I can't begin to tell you how much better they are than the miserable plaster imitations at Philadelphia."³⁹ During the period under consideration, trustees, curators, and administrators may have, perhaps somewhat self-servingly, bought into the notion that casts were, for the purposes of an American art museum, equal or superior to originals, but there were others who remained unconvinced or, as

no doubt they would have seen it, undeluded. No less a personage than General Luigi Palma di Cesnola, director of the Metropolitan Museum from 1879 until his death in 1904, thought casts utterly unworthy of a world-class institution and strenuously, if unsuccessfully, resisted attempts to enlarge the museum's collection. In a letter of 24 March 1885 to William E. Dodge, a member of the museum's board of trustees, Cesnola wrote with characteristic pugnacity:

What are *casts*? Copies made in plaster—of what are the casts in the Boston Museum? Copies made in plaster of *archaeological objects*, and existing in European museums, and nothing more. . . . Now the fact is, that our Museum possesses archaeological objects and paintings in *originals* instead of being inferior *casts* and *copies*. . . . The Boston Museum fulfills its duty as a Lyceum; and for a provincial city without a future prospect as our city has, its museum does very well; but what is sufficient for Boston would be utterly absurd and inefficient for a great city like New York. The Boston Museum is destined to remain what it is at present. A *Pygmy*.⁴⁰

Despite his vehement opposition, Cesnola could not avert the formation at the Metropolitan of a special committee on casts or block the acquisition during the 1890s of a large collection. (The special committee, holding views diametrically opposed to those of the director, quickly metamorphosed into a powerful cabal seeking his ouster.)⁴¹ Cesnola's opposition to cast collections turned out to be premature but his arguments were prophetic. Cesnola had not forgotten that the Metropolitan had, from its inception, aspired to equal or surpass the Louvre. Thus for Cesnola and, as time went on, for a growing number of American museum trustees and administrators, one of the most basic considerations involved in deciding the value of cast collections was whether a museum could successfully compete with its European counterparts. Obviously, in such a competition cast collections counted for little.

The Irreproducible

The new emphasis museums began to place on exhibiting originals was also connected with crucial changes in the wider artistic culture. The second half of the nineteenth century witnessed the decline of traditional history painting and consequently the erosion of the authority of the antique and Renaissance sculpture on which it had been based. Sculpture that had hitherto provided an undisputed grounding for artistic education and practice began to suffer ne-

glect as art schools accorded greater importance to life drawing and painting, and to spontaneous modes of execution. Academies in France and the United States shifted their emphasis from what Albert Boime calls "the executive" to "the generative" phase of composition, leading to the rise of a new "aesthetics of the sketch."⁴² In the United States, landscape painting replaced history painting as the leading art form as early as the 1850s, and in the period following the Civil War, loosely handled, painterly landscapes increasingly appealed to collectors. Beginning in the 1870s, Albert Pinkham Ryder, master of loaded and often seemingly incoherent painterly surfaces, slowly gained an audience and a market for his often controversial art. During the same period, James McNeil Whistler deeply impressed American collectors and artists perhaps as much with his aestheticizing philosophy as with his understated, almost monochromatic paintings. In the 1880s French Barbizon landscapes became fashionable among wealthy American collectors, who also began to develop an interest in the work of the French impressionists. A group of painters following the lead of such French Barbizon painters as Corot and Daubigny, created an American Barbizon School. Childe Hassam, Theodore Robinson, and Julian Alden Weir, among others, pursued successful careers working in an impressionist style somewhat more subdued than that of their French counterparts. Tonalism, an art of blurred and softened forms, acquired a following. George Inness, master of hazy, warmly colored landscape compositions, achieved celebrity among collectors and critics who lauded him as a "modern among the moderns."⁴³ Thomas Wilmer Dewing, another tonalist, depicted idealized women posed in landscape settings so vaguely painted as to verge on abstraction.⁴⁴

The widespread taste for genteel, painterly landscapes was symptomatic of the new value accorded artistic sensibility. The distinctive marks and touches an artist left on the surface of a work came to stand for the unique, irreproducible character of artistic genius. Unlike traditional academic art, which pursued an ideal of timeless, impersonal perfection, the landscapes of an Inness or a Whistler embodied a far more subjective and immediate sense of what a work of art might be. American museums may have been slow to embrace the productions of contemporary landscapists, but they nonetheless began to espouse the aesthetic values associated with advanced art. Consequently, the "battle of the casts" in Boston, and similar conflicts elsewhere, involved not only the question of whether museums should pursue traditional forms of popular education but the even more basic question of what ultimately defined a work of art.

Several factors thus combined to tilt the balance against casts. The interests of millionaire collectors, on the one hand, and those of intellectuals and artists, on the other, converged in the new policies of the Metropolitan Museum and the Museum of Fine Arts.⁴⁵ This is not to say that the concerns of affluent collectors were directly reflected in the ideas put forth by artists, critics, and aestheticians. The process was far more complex, far more mediated. Still, the aesthetic idealism of a Prichard or a Berenson served well enough the purposes of Morgan and his confreres. Faith in higher values, and the inspiration to be derived from authentic works of art, complemented, if at times perhaps a little too expediently, robber baron acquisitiveness and the penchant for ostentatious cultural display.

Therefore, it is perhaps no wonder that the Museum of Fine Arts and Metropolitan Museum reversed themselves so swiftly. In 1904, Prichard took up arms in the "battle of the casts" anticipating defeat but foreseeing eventual victory: "I shall lose," he wrote Mrs. Gardner, "but I shall have lit a great lamp—the lamp of real appreciation, of the first rate, of aesthetic conviction."⁴⁶ What he could not foresee was how quickly his "lamp of real appreciation" would triumph. Six years later the Museum of Fine Arts was exhibiting a greatly reduced number of casts and warning visitors that "the final perfection of style in the work of great masters cannot be reproduced in plaster."⁴⁷ At about the same time, the Metropolitan Museum appointed Edward Robinson as its new director. Robinson served until 1930, and there is no evidence that in his two decades in office he ever raised objections to the museum's policy of removing casts from its galleries to make room for "the masterpieces of different countries and times."⁴⁸

In retrospect, the outcome of the history sketched here seems inevitable: casts and replicas were fated to give way to originals, to objects that were indisputably works of art. Yet until the reversals of the early 1900s the outcome of this history was always in doubt. Still, it was never simply a conflict over the aesthetic or educational merit of casts, but, rather, a question of the evolving needs of the elites who controlled museums and who ultimately determined their direction. By 1910 it had become apparent that cast collections no longer had a role to play in museums, that they could only depress elite aspirations. Henceforth, a major American art museum would be, by definition, a repository of rare and costly works of art: "the Education," as Henry James observed, "was to be exclusively that of the sense of beauty."⁴⁹

CHAPTER FOUR

Samuel Parrish's Civilization

Essays devoted to museum founders tend to be celebratory. They praise the founders' vision, express gratitude for their benefactions, and dwell on their taste and character, often in fulsome terms. My purpose here is not to extol Samuel Parrish's foresight and taste, nor is it to pass retrospective judgment on a figure who flourished in the age of William McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt. Instead, I am interested in Parrish as a historical personage, and in his museum as an embodiment of the cultural values of his time.

Parrish opened his Southampton Art Gallery at precisely the moment when the United States was embarking upon its first large-scale imperial adventure: the Spanish-American War. Like the European powers it emulated and sought to surpass, the United States justified its imperialist impulses in terms of a "civilizing" mission. "Civilization" was a pervasive theme of the period.¹ In New York, Boston, Chicago, and a dozen smaller cities, newly erected art museums announced themselves centers of "civilization." They did this not in so many words but through their architecture and collections, which claimed for the United States the cultural legacy of Greece, Rome, Renaissance Italy, and the European Middle Ages. Parrish's museum was, in its modest way, also a monument to civilization. And although his ideal of civilization might today appear arbitrary or idiosyncratic, it coincided in important ways with the more grandiose claims that marked the beginning of his nation's imperial age.