An exhibition on the infinite possibilities of a misunderstood medium



STUART LOCHHEAD SCULPTURE

## PLASTER!

## An exhibition on the infinite possibilities of a misunderstood medium

laster as a material for creating sculpture has been used since antiquity. Throughout the centuries it was the medium for an artist's first creative ideas. It could not only serve as a model to transfer those ideas into marble or bronze but also as a way to faithfully copy and preserve them. Without plaster, the ideas of the antique world would never have been disseminated so widely from the Renaissance onwards and notably by the great art academies of Europe. Many works of sculpture presented at the official Salon in Paris were first exhibited in plaster.

Plaster is not always white; its natural appearance can be concealed by tinting to resemble bronze and terracotta or be polychromed and even gilded. For Auguste Rodin plaster was a preferred means of expression – his virtuoso handling of the material held infinite possibilities. Yet, almost paradoxically, a medium so close to the artist's hand has often been incorrectly regarded as secondary in a sculptor's oeuvre.

PLASTER!, featuring sculptures by Rodin, Jean-Joseph Carriès, Théodore Géricault, Arnold Böcklin, Germaine Richier, Maria Bartuszová and Rachel Whiteread amongst others, challenges this view and aims to refocus our attention and understanding of the medium within the world of sculpture.

Stuart Lochhead October, 2021

This exhibition was created for Stand Out, a special section curated by Luke Syson at Frieze Masters.



Hans Stoltenberg Lerche (1867-1920)
Un Pas en Avant (One Step Forward, a
caricature of Rodin's Balzac as a Seal)
Conceived in 1898 and likely cast
before 1900
Plaster
23 x 8 x 9 cm



Jean-Joseph Carriès (1855-1894)
Le Grenouillard (The Frog-man)
1892-1894
Patinated plaster
35 x 41 x 42 cm

STUART LOCHHEAD SCULPTURE

## PLASTERS FROM PARIS AND BEYOND

Penelope Curtis

Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890)

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

(Gypsum) Quarry

Oil on canvas 56.3 x 62.6 cm

The Hill of Montmartre with Stone

do such different kinds of things that it has a kind of split personality. But before we begin to analyse its different roles, let us think about where it comes from. Plaster of Paris is so-called because there was so much gypsum available in the quarries around Paris (Fig. 1), but it could also potentially be mined in the USA or Central Europe. There are even gypsum mines in England, and when circumstances dictate that alternatives must be found (when there are trade blockades, for example), then those less important sources come into their own. Gypsum is heated to dry it out, but when water is added to the ground powder it becomes liquid, before drying to become fully rigid. That remarkable changeability allows plaster to adopt many guises, and thus to fulfil roles which range from the medical, the decorative, to the artistic. Hard

too, if in smaller quantities. Broken limbs are immobilised in plaster casts; our teeth are cast by orthodontists. Plaster copies forms faithfully and then allows new casts of those forms to be made, in whatever other molten material, be it bronze, resin, or, once again, plaster.

This is to say, plaster can act as exterior (the mould) or interior (the form). It can allow more casts to be made, or it can be the absolute closest we will ever get to the original. This is why discerning collectors, knowing the true value of plaster within the sculptural process, have assigned it special value. Georg Treu, the pioneering collector of Auguste Rodin, knew better than most that Rodin's plasters had a unique place, and was one of the few curators to acquire them for a museum collection (Fig. 2). The Dresden Albertinum is thus unusual among museums today in presenting something closer to the artist's hand than his bronzes. How wall plaster is all around us; decorative plaster is this so? Because the original model (most been (and still remains) an absolutely central

likely in clay) would be destroyed after it was moulded, and thus the plaster cast from that mould would replace that first form (and be used for subsequent ones).

But Rodin himself set store by plaster in all its manifestations. This means that we might see amalgams by Rodin which include an original plaster (the one cast directly from the mould which had encased his clay or wax model) alongside a re-assembled piece, put together from bits of others, from the piece-moulds themselves, or from new casts. Rodin did not really care, and he had no reason to care. Collectors are inevitably more cautious, and so they should be. But plasters can certainly be more 'original' than bronzes, which are more open to abuse, and which tend to proliferate exactly because they have, in the past, seemed to be a safer bet in the marketplace.

Plaster is misunderstood by the market, but not by the artist, for whom it has always

material. Central not so much to repetition (this goes without saying, for it is still commonly used to create editions) as to creation. For a sculptor plaster is like pencil and paper; a quick way to try out an idea, either by building a form over a simple armature, or by pouring it into a mould. This is why you still see plaster in art schools, even if 3D printing is becoming ever more popular. While 3D printing makes moulds less necessary, it does not invent forms. Plaster does not just copy; it also creates. This is why plaster is complicated, because it appears at every stage of the sculptural process: before, during and after. It might have negligible importance, or it might be the sole bearer of the trace of the artist's hand. It might exist in hundreds or thousands of examples, or it might be unique. Artists like Rodin, or Jean-Joseph Carriès, who were trained to manipulate soft materials, found it easy to cross from clay to plaster, and their ceramic work is often equally undervalued.

Moreover, plaster is by no means always white. Sculptors patinated plasters just as they patinated bronzes, not merely simulating the colours of bronze (their putative destination), but finishing them off and in their own right. Plasters were respectable enough, and when they were placed indoors, in niches, or on the top of library shelves, plaster was indeed their intended and final material (Fig. 3). Not all sculptors liked their sculpture to be whiter than white; Antonio Canova (Fig. 4) is known to have used tea and coffee to temper the effect of marble, and similarly the whiteness of plaster could be offset with tints of brown and beige. But plaster need not simply imitate bronze or marble; it could stimulate a much more experimental approach to colour, as in Arnold Böcklin's 'Medusa', which seems to be a composite of materials and colours so rich that it evades full material analysis.

Though plaster might be seen as the workhorse of the studio, the pieces that come

Museo Gypsotheca Antonio Canova,

Possagno, Italy

to us through gallerists and museums are Penelope Curtis completed her term as Director generally smaller and more unusual. The pieces we see here are largely representative: small figurines, individual busts, experimental reliefs antique cast to the 3D scan in collaboration and decorative works, and parts from larger monuments. That these parts are often mask-like in form is not surprising, given plaster's aptitude for taking the form and texture of a surface, and then for hanging on a wall. This kind of quotationmaking allows a bigger work to give new life to a smaller part of it, as a kind of extract or almost literal offshoot. Just as plaster is suited to the making of facsimiles of parts of the body, be they medical or artistic, dead or alive, so it is suited to the creative re-use or re-invention of parts of

Sculpture's protean nature is perhaps unsettling, but if some are afraid to embrace its multiplicity, for others the challenge is endlessly inviting. It is, moreover, quintessentially what sculpture is about.

at the Calouste Gulbenkian Museum, Lisbon with the exhibition Infinite Sculpture: from the with the Beaux-Arts de Paris. This year she was visiting professor at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.





French plaster casts including Rodin, 1930s, Albertinum, Dresden, Germany Photo: Archiv Skulpturensammlung, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden

Oxford c. 1930s-1980s Photograph



John Piper (1903-1992) Codrington Library, All Souls College, **Tate Archive** 

© The Piper Estate. Photo: Tate





Théodore Géricault (1791-1824)
Moribund, a model for the
Raft of the Medusa
c. 1819
Patinated plaster
11 x 34.5 cm



Germaine Richier (1902-1959)
Le Crapaud (The Toad)
1940
Plaster
22 x 29 x 30 cm

(above and cover detail)

Auguste Rodin (1840-1917)

Bacchantes s'enlaçant
(Bacchantes Embracing)

1894

Plaster

17.5 x 16.4 12.2 cm

Maria Bartuszová (1936-1996)
Untitled, 1985
Plaster
48 x 56 x 20.5 cm
Unique
The Estate of Maria Bartuszová, Košice

The Estate of Maria Bartuszová, Košic and Alison Jacques, London Image: © The Archive of Maria Bartuszová, Košice





(above) (opposite

Arnold Böcklin (1827-1901) Auguste I

Shield with the Head of Medusa Caryatid

Conceived in 1885 and modelled around 1887 this plaster

Polychrome plaster and papier-mâché Diameter: 60.5 cm 43.5 x 32

(opposite)

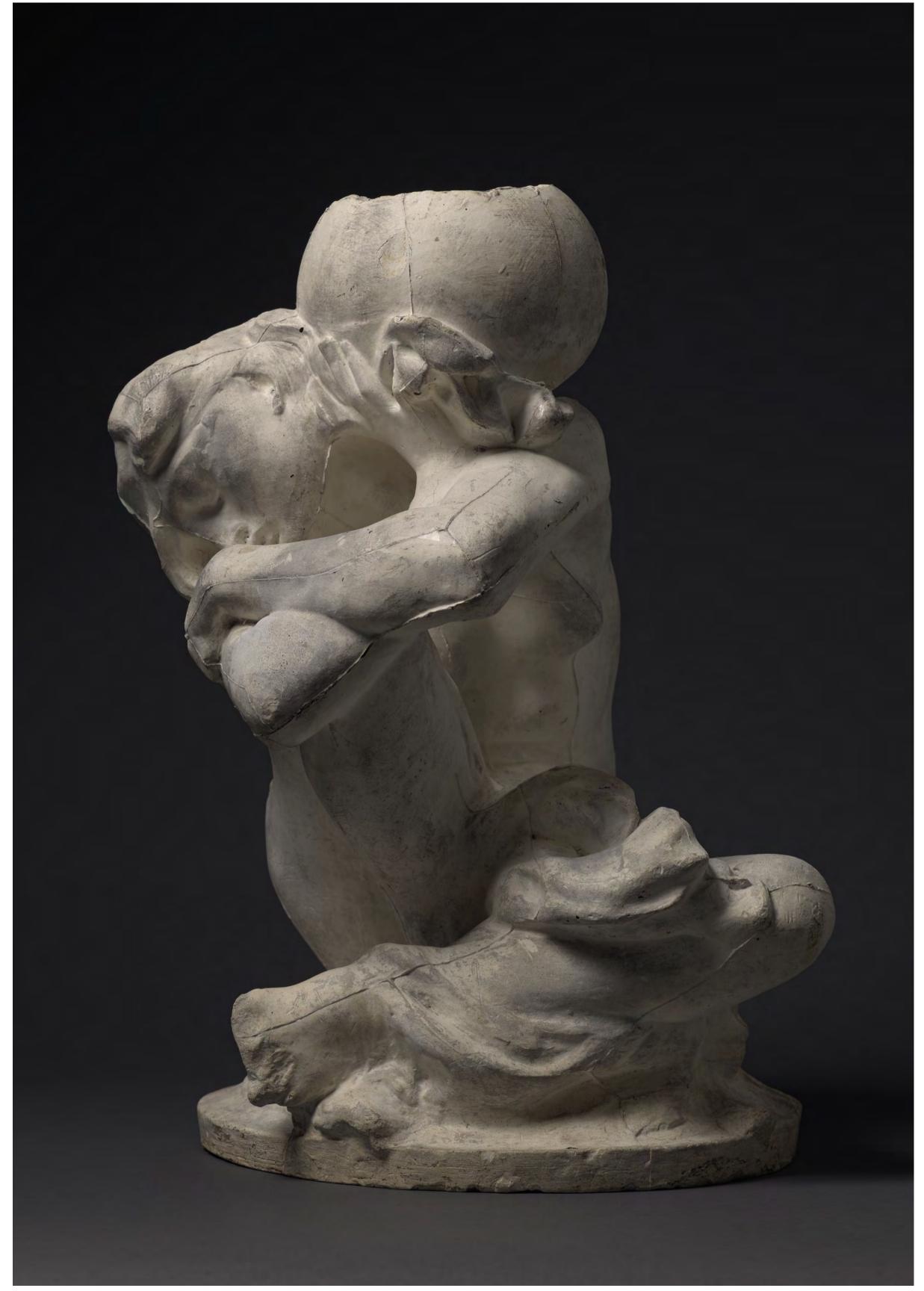
Auguste Rodin (1840–1917)

Caryatid Carrying an Urn

Conceived before 1885-6,
this plaster executed in 1886

Plaster

43.5 x 32 x 30 cm





(right) **Jean-Pierre Dantan** (1800-1869) *Niccolò Paganini (1782-1840)*1832

Plaster

32 cm high

(opposite)
François Rude (1784–1855)
Head of the Old Warrior
c. 1833–1835
Patinated plaster
66 cm high

(below, from left to right)

Maria Bartuszová (1936–1996)

Untitled, 1972

Plaster

15.5 x 31.5 x 21 cm

**Maria Bartuszová** (1936–1996) Untitled, 1972 Plaster 14.5 x 30.5 x 20 cm

**Maria Bartuszová** (1936-1996) Untitled, 1972

17 x 29 x 22.5 cm Unique

Unique

The Estate of Maria Bartuszová, Košice and Alison Jacques, London Image: © The Archive of Maria Bartuszová, Košice







Rachel Whiteread (b. 1963) SIT, 2007-2008 Plaster, pigment and steel (seven units and one chair) 75 x 40 x 45 cm Unique © Rachel Whiteread. Photo: Mike Bruce. Courtesy the artist and Gagosian

With grateful thanks to Rachel Whiteread, Gagosian, London, Allegra Pesenti, Alison Jacques, Tim Warner-Johnson and Emily Black.

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Jean-Joseph Carriès (1855-1894) Le Grenouillard (The Frog-man) 1892-1894 Patinated plaster 35 x 41 x 42 cm

Like in a Boschian dream, a half-man, half-frog creature materialises before the viewer, stretching its grotesquely long back forward so that its knees almost touch its shoulders. A giant toad crouches between the Frog-man's forearms. Their bodies and webbed limbs emerge from the ground as if they were fused together. Four smaller amphibians surround the central group, situating the scene in a fantastic swamp or pond.

This extraordinary composition was exhibited for the first time at the Salon de la Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts in Paris in 1892, establishing the international career of its creator, Jean-Joseph Carriès. The piece is one of only four known versions of the model ever produced by the artist in plaster, and a perfect example of the painstaking attention the sculptor paid

to the finish of his works. The plaster's soft modelling and waxy texture, together with its seemingly unmodelled parts, enhance the outlandish nature of the creature and its batrachian entourage. The rich, dark tone of the patination has been referred to by critics as 'vieux bois' ('old wood'). The hybrid nature of the sculpture's subject is thus reflected in its ambiguous treatment of the medium displaying both Carriès' wit and technical prowess.



Hans Stoltenberg Lerche (1867-1920) Un Pas en Avant (One Step Forward, a caricature of Rodin's Balzac as a Seal) Conceived in 1898 and likely cast before 1900 23 x 8 x 9 cm

Hans Stoltenberg-Lerche moved from Dusseldorf to Paris in 1890 to study under the Symbolist painter Eugène Carrière before becoming an acclaimed sculptor, glass maker and ceramicist in France and Italy. Like many of his fellow artists, he made a name for himself by exhibiting at the Paris Salon, where he showcased a number of his ceramic works in 1896 and 1898.

In the latter year, Rodin unveiled his monumental Balzac at the same venue, giving rise to polarised reactions from progressivist and conservative audiences in Paris. *Un Pas en Avant* represents a token of such a debate, humorously turning Rodin's groundbreaking portrait of Balzac into a free-standing seal as it takes 'one step forward'.

Casts of *Un Pas en Avant* were on sale in Montmartre throughout the summer of 1898. According to the newspaper Le Gaulois, Lerche's seal could be enjoyed 'by everyone, whether one admires or denigrates the work of Monsieur Rodin, because it is done with wit'. Rodin apparently enjoyed such a caricature a cast of the sculpture was part of the master's personal collection, where it was likely seen and sketched by Pablo Picasso during his first-ever trip to Paris around 1900. The model is now held at the Musée Rodin: it is one of five that are known to have survived until today.



Théodore Géricault (1791-1824) Moribund, a model for the Raft of the Medusa c. 1819 Patinated plaster 11 x 34.5 cm

Théodore Géricault's compositions derives from close observation of nature, which, according to his early biographers, often turned into a morbid obsession with the macabre. Around 1818-1819, the painter collected in his studio in Paris severed heads and limbs of criminals from the morgue to study the human anatomy in preparation for his masterpiece. The Raft of the Medusa (1819)

While preparing to paint the canvas, the artist drew and painted gruesome stilllives. He also produced three-dimensional models of the figures which were going to populate the finished painting. The present plaster represents a rare example of one of such figures, which was cast from a wax model in the artist's atelier, now unfortunately lost.

interest in the inner workings of muscles and tendons, especially around the figure's neck and behind the knees. As such, it may be considered both an écorché and a compositional study. While its original use was closely tied to Géricault's studio practice, the reproducibility of the medium allowed him to produce various casts. which could be gifted to friends, patrons and fellow artists, turning a jealously kept artistic device into a token of personal esteem.

The modelling shows Géricault's



Germaine Richier (1902-1959) Le Crapaud (The Toad) Plaster 22 x 29 x 30 cm

'As in every workshop, there reigned a great mess, sprinkled and powdered with plaster, and with clay stuck to the floor. In some black and sticky windows along the walls have been arranged boxes of fantastic

Thus begins Georges Limbour's description of his 1948 visit to Germaine Richier's studio. The artist's atelier is evocatively covered in plaster - a medium that had come to embody the essence of sculpting by the mid-twentieth century - while the 'fantastic insects' which populated Richier's glass cases reflect her interest in nature, which can be observed in the present work.

The Toad depicts a young female figure whose stance and anatomy resemble that of a large amphibian. Conceived in 1940, the piece is the first in a series of anthropomorphic sculptures that characterise the artist's mature oeuvre. anticipating works such as The Big Locust (1946) and *The Ant* (1953), and exploiting the human form to showcase an unsettling form of hybridity.

The present plaster cast was acquired directly from the artist by her friend, the Swiss sculptor Hermann Hubacher Only one other version in this material survives, and currently forms part of the Kunstmuseum collection in Bern.



**Auguste Rodin** (1840-1917) Bacchantes s'enlaçant (Bacchantes Embracing) 1894 Plaster

17.5 x 16.4 12.2 cm

No other artist in the history of European sculpture has explored the potential of plaster to the extent of Auguste Rodin. The master exploited its malleability and multifarious applications throughout his career, turning it into a fundamental site

of modernist sculpture research Rodin would initially sculpt his models in clay, from which a mould was then taken, and later, a plaster master cast was created. The master cast was thus ready to be moulded again and used for conversion into marble or sent to a bronze foundry. In Rodin's studio practice, however, plaster casts were not simply instrumental to the dissemination of his compositions, but were often employed to create new. original works. The composition of the present

Bacchantes Embracing, also known under the title Faunesse and Nature, derives from that of the female figures the artist conceived for the *Gates of Hell*, such as the Crouching Girl, Succubus and the Sirens. Both figures are represented with their legs tucked underneath them as they embrace each other. By assembling such similar models, Rodin achieves a uniquely erotic composition, a theme the artist explored both as a draughtsman and as a sculptor. Indeed, his pioneering approach to sculpture did not simply relate to the technical aspects of his studio practice, but also to the subject-matter he set out to explore.



Maria Bartuszová (1936-1996) Untitled, 1985 48 x 56 x 20.5 cm The Estate of Maria Bartuszová, Košice

and Alison Jacques, London Image: © The Archive of Maria Bartuszová, The Prague-born artist Maria Bartuszová largest city in Slovakia, in 1963, where she

settled with her family in Košice, the second worked in intentional isolation. This was further enhanced during the Cold War period. There, she often derived inspiration for her work from the nature that surrounded her. Rather than referencing a specific natural shape, however, the present work creates a new landscape altogether, which is characterised by a continuous interplay of textures, shapes and lines.

The whiteness of plaster, together with its darker marks and blemishes, captures the eye of the viewer. Rough surfaces are placed towards the edges of the sculpture. while smoother planes are at times interrupted by thin ropes, shallow cuts, and irregular incrustations, which grant an organic appearance to the piece. It is almos as if part of the craquelure of a painting, or a portion of desertic soil observed under a microscope was enlarged, continuously morphing before the beholder.

> Constantin Brâncuși, Jean Arp and Henry Moore are often mentioned as Bartuszová's early sources of inspiration. Untitled (1988) makes us wonder whether the sculptor also knew of Alberto Burri's 'cretti' ('cracks'), which are here turned into a living sculptural organism.



Shield with the Head of Medusa Conceived in 1885 and modelled around Polychrome plaster and papier-mâché

Diameter: 60.5 cm

The polychromy of ancient marbles was first theorised by scholars towards the end of the nineteenth century. motivating European painters to conduct unprecedented experiments with the colouring of sculpture. Arnold Böcklin, the father of Symbolism, claimed to have always known that Greek and Roman sculpture was originally polychromed, and applied this principle to his own threedimensional output, including the Shield with the Head of Medusa.

In Greek mythology, the serpent-haired Medusa had the power to turn people into stone with her gaze. She was cunningly slayed by Perseus, who was able to confront her by looking at her reflection on a polished shield. In antiquity, her features were often depicted on protective amulets. the so-called 'Gorgoneia'. While Böcklin's piece echoes the frontal composition of such amulets, Medusa's features lack any bestial relentlessness, displaying instead fear and stupor - a strikingly human

reaction to her imminent death. The artist's painterly experimentations were carried out on a mixture of plaster and papier-mâché, which allowed him to blend the paint on the surface of the sculpture and achieve such an iconic rendering of the monster's features. In light of its groundbreaking approach to the subject the Shield with the Head of Medusa is widely regarded as the artist's most accomplished sculpture as well as the epitome of Symbolist aesthetics.



**Auguste Rodin** (1840-1917) Caryatid Carrying an Urn Conceived before 1885-6. this plaster executed in 1886 Plaster  $43.5 \times 32 \times 30 \text{ cm}$ 

Marble Caryatids are among the most widely recognisable elements of classical architecture. But while they are unencumbered by the weight of the building which towers over their heads, Rodin's version is crushed to the ground. Rather than the urn she carries, it is the Carvatid's human condition that seems to force her down, as she bears, in the words of the poet Rainer Maria Rilke, 'its burden as we bear the impossible in dreams from which we can find no escape'.

The present model relates to a series of four other plasters in the collection of the Musée Rodin in Paris. Compared to these works, the urn is slightly flattened at the top, while the figure's left foot toes are shortened, demonstrating the artist's direct manipulation of the wet plaster after its initial casting. The piece-mould seams that are visible

across the work's surface derive from the setting of the original cast. Thus, the artist invites us to reflect on the process of artistic creation as much as on its final outcome, the artwork itself. These considerations would have not been lost on the first owner of the work, Auguste Feyen-Perrin, a painter and friend of Rodin's, who was gifted the present plaster in 1886, possibly after a visit to the sculptor's atelier.



François Rude (1784-1855) Head of the Old Warrior c. 1833-1835 Patinated plaster 66 cm high

In 1833, François Rude was given the commission for one of the four large highreliefs decorating the Arc de Triomphe in Paris. The resulting piece. The Departure of the Volunteers of 1792, is one of the bestknown works of Romantic sculpture, as well as one of the key French nationalist images. The relief is dominated by a flying female allegory of Liberty who brandishes her sword, inciting a group of men in antique armour to take up arms and fight

for their country. Below her, at the centre of the composition, an Old Warrior leads the charge. Both the Genius of Liberty and the Old Warrior captivated the audience's imagination in the mid-nineteenth century their heads were thus cast separately to face the demand of Paris' burgeoning art market. Bronzes and one terracotta version of

the Head of the Old Warrior are found in several public collections across the USA and France. Plaster versions are instead very rare. In the present version, the light brown and golden highlights underline the old man's furrowed brow, as well as his intense gaze and unruly mane of hair, enhancing the expressiveness of the modelling. Another model in plaster forms part of the collection of the Musée des Beaux Arts of Dijon, the birthplace



Jean-Pierre Dantan (1800-1869) Niccolò Paganini (1782-1840) 1832 Plaster 32 cm high

Jean-Pierre Dantan's plaster of the legendary virtuoso Niccolò Paganini is an essay in caricature. The lanky figure, with his disproportionate hips, monstrously long fingers that pick impossible chords on the strings of the violin, and sticky, long hair that frame his large forehead, demonstrate the artist's mastery in the genre, which paved the way for Honoré Daumier's later

Yet, standing in front of the sculpture, we are also struck by the sitter's gravitas. Paganini focuses his attention, as much as the viewer's, towards the act of playing. The misaligned hips follow the position of the shoulders, which are bent so that he may clasp the instrument with his chin. The violin is thus fused with its player, whose stance recalls a knotty vine, the material

with which the instrument itself is made. No medium other than plaster could underline so well the metamorphic quality of this composition. The rough, ambiguous surface of the statuette chimes with its satirical content, perpetuating the tension between musical mastery, popular magic and artistic mockery.



Untitled, 1972 Plaster 15.5 x 31.5 x 21 cm

14.5 x 30.5 x 20 cm 17 x 29 x 22.5 cm The Estate of Maria Bartuszová, Košice and Alison Jacques, London Image: © The Archive of Maria Bartuszová, Maria Bartuszová has been hardly

credited her rightful place in the pantheon of twentieth-century artists, but her featuring at *documenta* in 2007, as well as in important international exhibitions, including her forthcoming solo show at Tate Modern, has secured her importance on an international scale. The artist devised a unique method

of casting plaster by hand. As she played with her young daughter in their garden in Košice, she discovered that she could create whimsical abstract forms by pouring wet plaster into rubber balloons, which she often hung at the beginning of the drying process. The artist called such a technique 'gravistimulated casting'. Conversely, the material could be shaped by pushing, pressing or pulling, creating uniquely beautiful and highly evocative forms inside the rubber. Eggs, raindrops and the human body all represented sources of inspiration for her sculpture.

The three forms exhibited here represent an excellent example of the artist's biomorphic creations, showcasing the smooth, milky finish that broadly characterise her oeuvre. Their ethereal, fragile and purely abstract forms incapsulate the essence of Bartuszová's artistic research and are a powerful reminder of her ability to transcend limitations traditionally ascribed to the medium.



SIT, 2007-2008

artist placed one-hundred resin casts of the empty space underneath chairs next to each other, turning Bruce Nauman's A Cast of the Space Under my Chair (1965-1968) into a reflection on collectivity and shared experiences. In SIT Whiteread returns to work on the same object and on the opposition between positive and negative space. This

time, the sculptor invalidates the chair's function by filling the space above the seat with blocks of patinated plaster. While the title urges the viewer to sit down, the work of art denies this possibility altogether. The resulting antithesis calls to mind Chris Townsend's words, who aptly described how 'in Whiteread's work, "things" collide past/future: presence/absence: public/ private: space/solid: temporary/permanent aesthetics/historical relevance.'

Ever since Ghost, the cast of the walls inside a Victorian townhouse, was exhibited at the Chisenhale Gallery in 1990, Whiteread's sculpture has been associated with plaster. SIT thus constitutes a selfreflection on the artist's career, as well as the sculptor's longstanding relationship with such a medium.



Rarity Integrity Beauty

PLASTER! will be on view from 13-17 October 2021 Stand D05 Frieze Masters The Regent's Park, London

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