

## Book Review

Almudena Negrete Plano (ed.), *Anton Raphael Mengs y la Antigüedad*. Madrid, Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando, 2013. ISBN 978-84-96406-28-5. 289 pp., 100 col. illus. €32.

In the middle of the eighteenth century, Spanish art students unable to travel to Italy who wanted to become familiar with classical sculpture had to make do with those that Velázquez had sent from Rome to Madrid to adorn the Alcázar and the seventy-three statues and busts from the collection of Christina of Sweden that had found their way to the palace of La Granja de San Ildefonso. Against this background, it is impossible to exaggerate the importance of the vast collection of moulds and casts that Anton Raphael Mengs donated via the Spanish monarch to the Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando in the Spanish capital in 1776.

At the age of twelve, the young Mengs was taken by his Danish father, the miniaturist and enamellist Ismael Mengs, to Rome to make drawings of the most admired works of antiquity and the *Stanze* of Raphael. Imbued with the notion that it was in those works that true beauty was to be found, after a brief period in Dresden the artist returned to Italy accompanied by a carriage laden with plaster casts of classical sculpture that his father must have taken back to Germany at the end of their previous visit.

From this point on, Mengs seized every opportunity to continue the family tradition by amassing a vast collection of casts and, where possible, moulds of classical and contemporary sculptures from Florence to Capua. They might be full-size copies of whole bodies or figural groups, busts or portrait heads; the aim was not to achieve complete series, but to encompass the widest possible variety of expressions. Occasionally he even acquired more than one version of a Roman copy of a Greek original. In some cases the continuing existence of these casts is all the more valuable in that they represent the state of a sculpture before later restoration; in others they show an eighteenth-century restoration which is no longer visible today.

Upon his appointment as *pintor de Cámara* to Carlos III in 1761, Mengs arranged for the moulds and casts to be transported from Italy to Madrid. He would make use of them himself in preparing his designs for the fresco decoration of three ceilings in the new Palacio Real, but his intention was also that they would be used to teach students how to draw according to the Neo-Classical ideal of perfection. During his *intermezzo* in Italy between 1769 and 1774 he continued to augment the collection. By now his ambition had grown even bolder: especially by having moulds at his disposal, he planned to furnish his studios in both Rome and Madrid with as complete a set of casts of ancient sculpture as possible, as well as having copies sent to the Spanish provincial towns, Lisbon, and even as far afield as Manila and Mexico City.

After Mengs's death in Rome in 1779, the casts suffered damage from repeated copying, adverse atmospheric conditions or vandalism prompted by the reaction against academicism. For instance, the cast of the Egyptian Antinous made while it was in the Musei Capitolini, once complete, has survived only as a bust. However, thanks to a restoration campaign begun in 2001, the Academia de San Fernando was able to open an exhibition at the end of 2013 of some of those casts and drawings after the antique by Mengs himself and by some of his followers. The accompanying catalogue contains splendid photographs of and detailed commentary on fifty-eight items, as well as including the texts of twenty-eight documents. The six fascinating introductory essays, two of them by the editor (whose 2009 doctoral thesis on the casts is available online: <http://eprints.ucm.es/17146/1/T31083.pdf>), range over the detailed history of Mengs's collecting activities, the uses to which he put his casts – including his three different reconstructions of the Pasquino group – and the Neo-Classicism of his Spanish followers. In this connection, one of the authors singles out the fresco in the dome of San Antonio de la Florida as 'the best Neo-Classical painted ceiling', the work of none other than Goya, who had probably worked with

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Mengs on the latter's *Apotheosis of Trajan* in the Real Palacio.

The focus on his collection of plaster casts in this admirable publication throws valuable light on the importance of Anton Raphael Mengs, not only as one of the principal representatives of Neo-Classicism

painting, but also as an indefatigable teacher, theoretician, collector and student of antiquity.

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