

Re-envisioning criteria for documentation of plaster artist models in museum collections

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Abstract

In the nineteenth century, plaster artist models were an intermediary step in the sculpting process. Since they feature complex methods of construction, a variety of materials, and were used in different ways, the classification and documentation of these objects in museum collections is often complicated. This paper proposes criteria to use in the study of plaster artist models, developed in the context of an ongoing research project about the Swiss sculptor Vincenzo Vela (1820-1891). The method presented here allows models to be considered within a suitable historical and technical context, reflecting their material and physical characteristics, as well as their role and importance in the sculpting process.

Keywords

Plaster artist models, plaster, documentation, museum collections.

Introduction

This article will explore issues relating to the documentation of plaster artist models and criteria that reflect the particular circumstances of the creation and use of these objects. To demonstrate how specific criteria can be applied to the study of actual objects, a system of documentation created as part of an ongoing project studying the work of the Swiss sculptor Vincenzo Vela (1820-1891) is presented here.

In the mid-nineteenth century, Vincenzo Vela was an active and successful artist who created sculpture for private patrons and secured numerous public commissions in Italy and Switzerland. During his life, he collected the plaster models used in his work and eventually exhibited them when he built his studio-house-museum in his hometown of Ligornetto, Switzerland in the early 1860s. The models were donated to the Swiss Confederation by Vela's son after his death at the end of the nineteenth century and became the core of the collection of the Museo Vincenzo Vela. Today the museum's collection consists of over 200 plaster objects relating to the artistic activity of the sculptor, including busts, reliefs, figures, as well as several final sculptures in stone.

Vela's work and life has been extensively explored from an historical and artistic point of view (Zanchetti, 2020; Wasmer, 2009; Mina, 2002, Zanchetti, 1998, Scott, 1979), yet many of the more technical aspects of his work have not been fully studied and understood yet. A four-year research project that began in 2020, "The sculptor's mark: plaster models in the legacy of Vincenzo Vela" (SUPSI - Dipartimento ambiente costruzioni e design), is currently studying the models' constituent materials, construction, and use, in order to better understand the role of the model in the artist's work. The interdisciplinary team of researchers is made up of conservators, art historians, and specialists in artistic techniques and scientific methods.

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Figure 1 – General view of main Octagon gallery at the Museo Vincenzo Vela. Photo: Mauro Zeni © Museo Vincenzo Vela

The main part of the study, which will be discussed in this paper, is based on the systematic collection and organization of pertinent information about the models through direct observation and scientific investigations that will be used to build a greater understanding of the material and technical aspects of Vela's working process. Confronting issues about documentation and considering how plaster artist models exist in museum collections in general has led to the development of a methodology and series of criteria of data organization. This defining or "re-envisioning" of criteria allows for the capture of information that more fully reflects the multifaceted nature of plaster artist models; the fact that the collection of Vincenzo Vela's models is comprehensive and represents the work of one sculptor over time means that it presents a rare opportunity for the documentation of this genre of object that is also applicable to plaster artist models in other museums and collections.

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1. Plaster artist models: an overview

Five important aspects of plaster artist models to consider were identified at the beginning of the project: their definition and the correct terminology to use in referring to them; the different ways in which they were used; the recognition of challenges in studying this type of object; an understanding of how they can be used to develop insight into an artist's working methods; and how to document them in a way that reflects their complexities.

1.1. Definition and terminology

It is important to properly define plaster artist models since it determines the criteria to be used. Considering that plaster models are complex in terms of their construction, materials, use, and presentation in the past, the way that they are referred to in the literature is often inconsistent. The same objects are often interchangeably defined as "models", "casts", and "sculptures", a situation that becomes more complicated when terms in multiple languages are included, such as "*bozzetto*", "*maquette*" and "*modèle*". To understand these inconsistencies, it is important to first examine why they exist. Since all the terms can be technically correct, the context within which the objects are being defined determines the correct term and its use must be explicit. Some refer to the nature of the object (cast) and others to its initial use (model) and even others can allude to how it is exhibited (sculpture). For this project, a plaster artist model was defined as a plaster cast of an original clay (or another malleable material such as plasticine or wax) model created by the artist in different scales (small, reduced, or full-scale) to represent the relative or exact form, volume, and finish of a sculpture (depending on the working process followed for the individual object).



Figure 2 – Models in the galleries in the Museo Vincenzo Vela, Ligornetto, Switzerland. Photo: E. Manship.

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1.2. Use and "identity"

Plaster artist models were used as a guide by the artist and/or workshop assistants in realizing the final sculpture. Thus, an integral part of their nature and "identity" is tied to this process. However, they also had other "identities" as they were used in many different ways in addition to their principal purpose of aiding in the transfer of the design. They were formally exhibited (as part of academic and artistic exhibitions), collected (in the artist's lifetime and afterwards), used as personal promotion and publicity pieces (to present formally and informally to actual and potential clients), and to promote the artist's artistic legacy (to create a collection of the cumulative work of the artist). They therefore represent a source of insight into the entire sculpting process, yet at the same time they are also individual objects that raise important historical and artistic questions.



Figure 3 – A reduced-scale plaster model and the corresponding final sculpture: Vincenzo Vela, *Monumento a Guglielmo Tell*, 1856, plaster, Museo Vincenzo Vela; Vincenzo Vela, *Monumento a Guglielmo Tell*, 1856, stone, Città di Lugano. Photos: E. Manship.

1.3. Studying models

The challenges involved in studying plaster artist models can be attributed to several factors: lack of information about materials and methods of construction (including the involvement of others such as assistants, students, other professionals), that is often not fully understood since it is tied to workshop practices that in the nineteenth century were generally

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not well-documented; loss or destruction (since for some artists, they were discarded or destroyed as part of the working process); presentation and exhibition as art objects or finished sculptures (more for aesthetic appearance rather than practical use); restoration (they were sometimes heavily restored, retouched, and presented as “sculptures” in their own right with signs of working process lost through removal or application of covering layers); finally, their presentation as secondary objects (research often concentrates on final sculptures, and thus plaster artist models are considered in a relative rather than an independent way).

Today plaster artist models are generally found in two different ways in museums: as individual models in broader collections; and as collections dedicated to individual artists (such as the plaster cast collection and museum of Antonio Canova in Possagno, Italy, and Thorvaldsen’s Museum in Copenhagen, Denmark).

1.4. Using models to understand an artist’s working methods

The process of making sculpture consists of several different stages (preliminary drawings or *bozzetti*, clay model, plaster model, final sculpture) and sometimes the relationships between these stages are not explicit and certain aspects of a sculptor’s work are not reflected in the objects that remain. Thus, to understand an artist’s working methods, if they are not recounted in another way (letters, diaries, photography), it is necessary to try to reconstruct them from the objects which are available. Since the plaster artist model occupies the position in the middle of the process, and physically reflects signs of the stage before it (the clay model) and the stage after it (signs from the transfer of the design to stone), it is an ideal object to use in learning about the working methods of the artist.

1.5. Documentation

Like the terminology used to describe them, the criteria applied to identify and individuate aspects of plaster artist models in museum collections often is not precise enough to accurately reflect their complex and multifaceted nature. A situation that compounds the difficulty in understanding these objects is that standard methods of collecting and recording basic information about them in museums (databases, photography, condition reports, restoration reports, scientific reports, and references in literature) often are not structured in a way that best reflects their complexity. This is due to the fact that related documents often present individual aspects of the models in isolation or only based on one perspective (such as that of conservation, collections management, or an art historical context).

The nature of plaster artist models requires that they are presented in a broader context. Recent exhibitions, conferences, and publications highlighting aspects of plaster objects in museum collections in general have led to a greater understanding and appreciation for these objects (Manship, Felici & De Bernardis, 2019; Cucciniello, Oldani & Zatti, 2017;

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Guderzo & Lochman, 2017; Guderzo, 2012; Frederiksen & Marchand, 2010; Trusted, 2007). In addition, current and historical manuals about sculpture (Mills, 2005; Clérin, 1995; Brooks, 2005; Millar, 1899; Partridge, 1895; Carradori, 1802), relevant literature featuring glossaries and catalogues (Dickerson et al., 2012; Baudry, 2005) and case studies about individual models or artists (Salomon, Beltramini & Guderzo, 2018; Draper & Papet, 2014; Lapaire, 2010; Mina, 2009; Draper, 2003; D'Alessandro, L. & Persegati, 1987; Greenthal, 1985; Honour, 1972a; Honour, 1972; Lavin, 1964) contribute to the understanding of the complexity and variety of plaster objects in general. As a subset of this group, plaster artist models are gaining interest as they represent a significant part of an artist's process rather than a reproduction of a finished work. It is important that the relevant documentation of these objects also follows this trend.

2.Confronting documentation: criteria and systems

In the project, "The sculptor's mark: plaster models in the legacy of Vincenzo Vela", the main objective is to evaluate the plaster artist models of the artist Vincenzo Vela within a suitable historical and technical context to best present their material and physical characteristics as well as to reflect their importance as part of the sculpting process. Although much is written about Vela from an art historical point of view, not much is known about the details of the techniques and materials used in his work. Thus, the goal of this project is to collect information about these aspects of his work primarily through the close observation of the models in the collection of the Museo Vincenzo Vela using a systematic application of criteria and integrated documentation system across the collection.

2.1. Initial considerations

Developing an appropriate approach to studying the models began with identifying different types of relevant information and formulating methods of organizing and recording information. Three different important aspects of the models were initially considered: their historical and artistic context; their role in the sculpting process; and the models both as individual pieces and parts of a collection.

The sources used for collecting information about the historical and artistic context of each model were letters, receipts, museum records, relevant literature, historical photographs, paintings, and prints showing the artist's studio, and the type of information collected included the terms of the commission, how many times the model was used, as well as where and when it was created.

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Figure 4 – Pierre Henri Theodore Tetar van Elven, *Lo studio di Vincenzo Vela a Torino*, 1858, Watercolour, Museo Vincenzo Vela. Photo: Mauro Zeni © Museo Vincenzo Vela.

These plaster artist models played an important role in the context of the sculpting process, and represent an intermediary stage between the preliminary materials (drawings, *bozzetti*, photographs) and the clay model, and the final sculpture. The plaster models preserve signs from the clay model (which no longer exists), and also presents evidence of the process of transferring the design of the sculpture to the stone, which is otherwise practically undocumented, they are a source of evidence about these lost “links” in the history of the works of art for which there is often little other relevant evidence.

In the standard process, the clay model was created by the artist and his workshop following the designs developed through drawings and *bozzetti* (small three-dimensional “sketches” representing the presentation and composition for the sculpture). Once the clay model was finished, a mould was created of it to preserve original form before any shrinking and cracking of the clay could take place. For many models, the process of making the mould involved the destruction of the clay model (thus the term “waste” mould).

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The process of transferring a design from a model to stone is understood in general terms, yet the information about how this was actually done by individual artists is often less clear since it was a workshop activity which was often not well-documented in the nineteenth century. However, this information is often important as it was a stage in which there were many choices made by the artist. This is especially important for the study of Vincenzo Vela since he was first trained as a stoneworker from a very young age and thus was always an active participant in the final stage of sculpting stone. Some artists used a more approximate model (in terms of details) to represent correct volume but left the execution of details in stone to the sculptor directly. Other artists such as Antonio Canova made highly accurate models because they preferred this practice or because their students and assistants were largely responsible for the bulk of the sculpting work.



Figure 5 – Three phases of objects created for one monument. Left: Vincenzo Vela, *Bozzetto for La Scienza dolente. Monumento funerario di Edoardo and Antonio Kramer, 1872, terracotta, Museo Vincenzo Vela*; Center: Vincenzo Vela, *La Scienza dolente. Monumento funerario di Edoardo and Antonio Kramer, 1872, plaster, Museo Vincenzo Vela*; Right: Vincenzo Vela, *La Scienza dolente. Monumento funerario di Edoardo and Antonio Kramer, 1872, marble, Cimitero Monumentale di Milano*. Photos: E. Manship.

The dual nature of Vela's plaster models as individual objects and as components of a larger collection led to a broader study of trends and patterns in the material and technical characteristics of the models. Connecting individual models to other models by the same artist (even if they do not exist in the same collection) can be useful in shedding light on the role of the model and the working methods of the artist over time. However, many models exist as individual objects in museum collections and thus comparisons are difficult. The possibility of studying a large and comprehensive collection of plaster artist models kept together since their production thus presented a rare opportunity.

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Figure 6 – Two models exhibited independently: Vincenzo Vela, *Monumento a Tommaso Grossi*, 1857, plaster, Museo Vincenzo Vela; Vincenzo Vela, *Monumento a Gabrio Piola*, 1856, plaster, Museo Vincenzo Vela. Photo: E. Manship.

Once identified, these three important aspects were then translated into a system of documentation for the collection whereby two different sets of criteria were established: a general one about the history and use of the individual models based on literature and primary sources; and a specific one about the materials, structure and surface characteristics of the model based on direct observation. The first set of criteria was used to compile a single document bringing together a variety of information for each object, and the second set was used to identify and define specific physical, material, and technical characteristics of the models that could be used in better understanding individual objects and in making comparisons across the collection.

2.2. Documentation of general information

For each individual model, a Technical Data Sheet (TDS) was created, representing the primary method of documentation of general information about the object. It was divided into different sections, emphasizing the nature of the models as objects created through a physical process, and used in a process.

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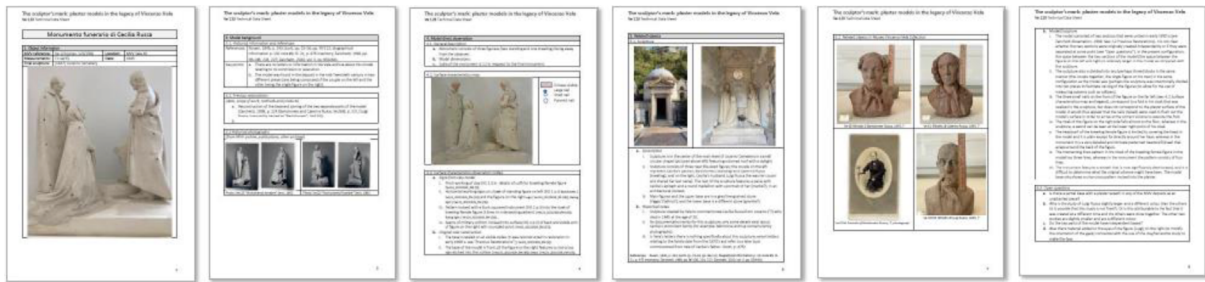


Figure 7 – Example of a Technical Data Sheet (TDS).

Each TDS features the following categories of general information:

- General information: title and photograph, museum inventory number, dimensions, date, location of model, and final sculpture;
- Model background: historical information and direct references in the literature to the model, information about previous restoration work, and historical and archival photographs of the model;
- Final sculpture: photographs, historical and general information about the final sculpture including its material, date, and location;
- Related objects: information about other objects involved in the process of creating the sculpture such as preliminary drawings, *bozzetti*, and photographs;
- Analysis: general comments and conclusions about the model, comparisons of the model and the final sculpture, and the analysis of information (to separate as much as possible evidence and interpretation).

The use of these categories for each individual model enabled the compilation of information about specific objects in a systematic way across the collection using a standard method.

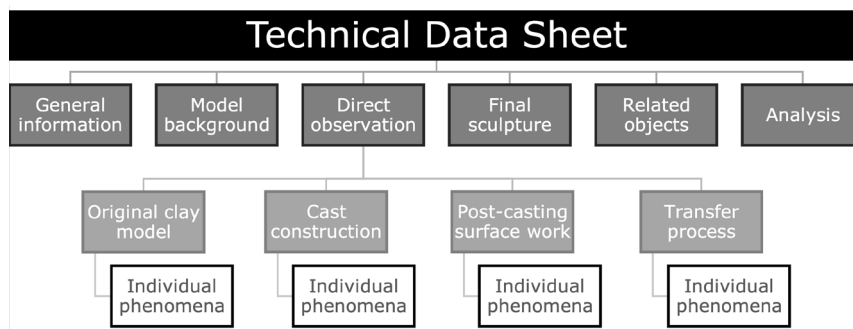
2.3. Documentation of direct observation

Whereas the general information recorded about the models in the TDS places the models in their historical and artistic context, and emphasizes their role in the sculpting process, the direct observation of the models aims to tie materials, structure, construction, and surface characteristics of plaster models (through the identification of phenomena or “signs” tied to modelling, casting, construction, or transfer) to different phases of their creation and use.

In this phase of the project, models were observed in direct light (to see what is visible on the surface), raking light (to highlight irregularities and differences in texture and “topography”), ultraviolet light (to note residual material on the surface from surface working, coatings, and repairs), and the handheld digital microscope (to collect microscopic images of surface features without samples).

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Graphic 1 – Organization of information in Technical Data Sheet (TDS).

To help organize the information on the TDS, four main categories of “signs” connected with different phases of the sculpting process were identified through direct observation and grouped together:

- I. Original clay model: those originating from the original clay (or other malleable material such as plasticine or wax) model visible on the surface of the plaster model such as direct working with fingers and tools and carved and incised designs;
- II. Cast construction: those suggesting methods used in creating the cast, such as materials and armature, joins, and flash lines;
- III. Post-casting surface work: those indicating the addition of material such as added fresh plaster or the removal of material and refining of the plaster model;
- IV. Transfer process: those providing information about the transfer process such as nails and points made by pointing tools as well as different types of crosses on the surface.

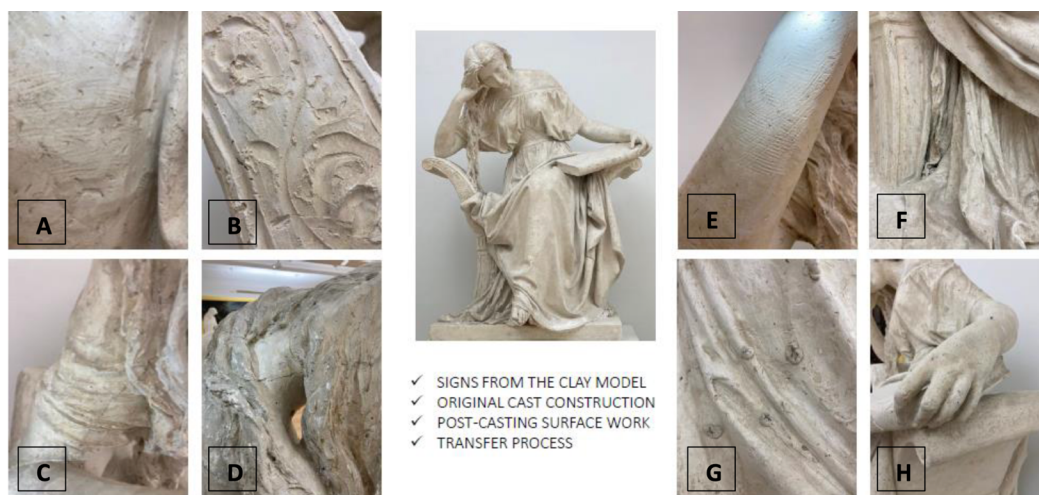


Figure 8 - Examples of different signs on the surface of a plaster artist model. A & B: Signs from tool marks and incised decoration originating from the clay model; C & D: Flash lines from the construction of the plaster cast; E & F: Surface grating and use of cloth dipped in wet plaster in post-casting surface work; G & H: Pencil marks and nails used in the transfer process. Photos: P. Jaccard.

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Information from subsequent scientific investigations furnishing additional data was added to the TDS if it was available. For example: materials characterization with X-Ray fluorescence spectroscopy and microscopy techniques (stereoscopic, optical, and the Scanning Electron Microscope), as well as investigations of structure and form with techniques such as X-ray radiography, and 3-D scanning.

2.4. Bringing it all together

The documentation of the “signs” noted on the surface of models was important not only to the study of individual objects but to understand how they appeared on different models in the collection. Thus, signs or “phenomena” were noted in the TDS for each object, then each individual phenomenon was defined in a general document called the Visual Glossary (VG). This allowed for the natural grouping of repeating materials, signs or phenomena that were common to many objects across the collection. Although visual glossaries can be found in the literature relating to sculpture, there is no accepted standard Visual Glossary in use for this type of object.

Since the objects studied were all part of an individual artist’s collection, it was also important to look at similarities, differences, features, and characteristics across the collection to better understand both individual models and working methods of the artist over time through recognizing patterns. This required a method for looking at phenomena in a broader way.

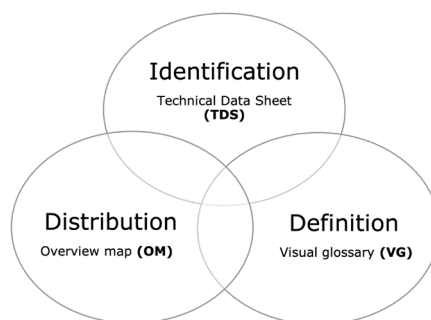
An Overview Map (OM) was created to organize the information gathered about the objects and present it in a unified way arranged by criteria set out in the direct study section of the TDS and defined in the Visual Glossary. This spreadsheet format presents a panorama of the collection and surface features in general: across the top of the horizontal axis is a thumbnail sketch of each Vela plaster model studied presented in chronological order. The models are grouped by periods of his working life indicated by the red and blue color scheme (the sculptor’s Milan and Turin periods are shown). The vertical axis presents the individual phenomena divided into the categories set out in the direct observation section of the TDS (original clay model; cast construction; post-casting surface work; and transfer process). This format enables the use of the Overview Map as a quick reference when discussing both individual models and the collection.

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Figure 9 – The Overview Map: featuring the models studied across the horizontal axis, and each individual phenomena on the vertical axis.

The three components of the documentation system (TDS, VG, OM) thus can be used together to systematically collect information about all aspects of the plaster models as well as to study the characteristics of their surfaces through analysis of their occurrences and distribution both in individual models and across the collection.



Graphic 2 – Documentation of phenomena with Technical Data Sheet, Visual Glossary, and Overview map.

Conclusions

Plaster artist models are important objects both for their intrinsic artistic value, but also for their value in terms of what they can help us to understand about the process in which they were used. The fact that these objects were a crucial intermediary step in the sculpting process means that they represent a valuable testimony of stages for which there is no longer any physical evidence (the clay model), and aspects of the sculptor’s work and intent that are often not apparent or have been eliminated in the final sculpture (including nails, points, crosses, and other marks that reveal aspects of the working process of the artist).

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Using specific criteria and methods of documentation that reflect the complexity and unique nature of these objects will encourage their wider appreciation and encourage their study in greater depth in the future whether they are considered as individual objects, as objects in relation to a final sculpture, or as part of a genre. The criteria and system of documentation used in this project was created for looking at a specific group of objects in great detail. However, the identification of important aspects of plaster artist models (physical characteristics and use) is applicable to plaster artist models in other collections as well.

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