**Introduction**

We are applying for a Humanities Texas Major Media Grant for the 2020-2021 grant period in order to (1) take complete scans of the publicly accessible plaster cast collection at the Blanton Museum, (2) convert the scans into usable 3D digital models and make them available for public download and manipulation and (3) design and offer an interactive map timeline of the process of making and purchasing the plaster casts in the 19th and 20th centuries. Your funding would allow us to bring our digital humanities project to a complete and stable stage, ready for access by students and scholars of classics, art history, and museum studies at all levels of instruction. This project seeks to engage with ongoing discussions regarding museum collecting practices, the history of using plaster cast collections as a pedagogical tool, and foreground questions of authenticity in art objects. The virtual gallery of 3D digital models of the plaster cast collection will allow for interactive participation as a pedagogical and research tool at varied scholastic levels.

Blast from the Casts will draw from the impressive collection of plaster casts of Greek and Roman sculpture from the Blanton Museum at the University of Texas at Austin. The collection of plaster casts, colloquially referred to as the “Battle Casts,” began in 1894 with the acquisition of three models by William J. Battle, Associate Professor of Greek at the university. Over the next three decades, Battle supervised the acquisition of over 100 additional plaster casts of Greco-Roman “masterworks.” The collection includes such well-known works as the Apollo Belvedere, the Delphi Charioteer, and fragments from the Parthenon frieze. Battle saw the pedagogical value of these casts and their potential significance for a Texas university with a long tradition in scholastic innovation. Writing in the UT campus newspaper *Alcalde* in 1896, he proclaimed that “[t]o teacher and student alike [the casts] must bring inspiration and enthusiasm for the study from every point of view of the remains of the people to whom even such glorious statues as these were in no sense remarkable.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Indeed, collecting plaster casts was an established tradition in large university and museum collections; Cornell University, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Oxford’s Ashmolean Museum had all established a canon of plaster cast collecting to make sculptures housed in continental Europe more accessible.

What is remarkable about the plaster casts now, however, is their survival through decades of institutional disillusion with plaster casts as “inauthentic” replicas of ancient masterworks.[[2]](#footnote-2) While many museums and institutions destroyed their casts or sold them into private collections, Battle saved the Battle Casts from this fate. Though lack of space and changing ideals of authenticity made it infeasible to showcase the casts in their original gallery hall in the UT Main Building, they were shuffled through storage rather than disposed of altogether. In 1976 Caroline Houser, an associate professor in the Department of Art and Art History at UT, worked on a survey of the casts’ condition. Initial criticisms of inauthenticity had subsided, as these models could now be viewed as original objects in their own right; the damage sustained from constant moving from gallery spaces and into storage was evident on the casts’ surfaces, much like the archaeological traces of their original ancient prototypes. Further, a renewed interest in the legacy of North American cast collections gave new popularity to the second largest surviving collection of plaster casts in the country.

Twelve of the collection’s 70 total casts are now housed in a seminar room at the Blanton Museum of Art, while the others remain in storage.[[3]](#footnote-3) Accessibility to the full collection is a major aim of this project that will be explored further below. The most common use of the casts today is as a pedagogical tool for teaching assistants and professors of art, art history, and classics. Students are at once able to enjoy the formal elements of Greco-Roman sculpture and discuss the plaster casts as a significant example of 19th and 20th century museum collecting practices. We would like to extend this opportunity to students beyond the confines of UT’s campus. The casts continue to draw wide attention and interaction; in July 2019, artist Lily Cox-Richard opened her installation *She-Wolf + Lower Figs,* which featured multiple casts wrapped in colored tulle as well as a mold of the Capitoline Wolf made from 3D scans of the original and a cast of the object. As Cox-Richards told us, it was not only an opportunity to challenge the pervasive myth of a monochrome antiquity, but an opportunity to address questions on the very notions of “taste” — especially of Western taste — in the study of the “classical” legacy. The exhibition has garnered significant media and institutional attention, and the artist has opened new doors for the use of the casts. We hope to build on the growing attention of the plaster casts at the Blanton as the second largest collection in the country and continue the tradition of Texas institutions providing innovative opportunities for deeper study, dissemination, and critique in the humanities.

**Elements of the Project**

The first major component of our project is a user-friendly online map tracing the history of the individual Battle Casts from their original statues to the Blanton Museum as a means of conceptualizing the steps involved to form a cast collection. The other elements are 3D photogrammetrical models of the Battle Casts for users to export and color and recolored 3D models of the current Lily Cox-Richard exhibit, which will preserve her intervention with the casts as part of their rich history and allow the public to continue to engage with the conversations sparked by the exhibit. The map will display the find spots of the original statues from which the casts were made, the museums where the originals were located at the time of casting, the cast workshops that made the plaster casts, and their final location at UT. These locations allow one to trace the path of creation for each individual cast and to see the broader picture of the development of the collection, which serves as a case study for the commercial and aesthetic values that shaped the acquisition of cast collections in general in the 19th century. In this way, the map capitalizes upon the unique documentation UT has for the Battle collection and disseminates the information beyond UT Austin. Through the use of map filters, users will be able to focus on specific features like all of the casts made by a single workshop, demonstrating its prominence in the 19th century, or looking at all of the casts accessioned in a particular year to compare them to the aesthetic standards in vogue at the time. Our project will also increase access to the fascinating history of the cast collection as it, much like other cast collections, was removed from display and scorned as “inauthentic” in favor of slides in the classroom, only to be restored to public spaces once attitudes shifted in favor of casts once again. The life cycle of these casts as they moved around UT’s campus in this series of neglect and renewal provides users of Blast from the Casts with a detailed source for analyzing the cultural history regarding attitudes towards the casts and their broader implications for the importance of classics, the hierarchical nature of how one ought to access the classical world, and what role representations in their various forms play for the study of classics now.

As stated, the Battle Seminar Room in the Blanton Museum displays a limited selection of the cast collection; the rest of the casts have been in long term storage since at least 2008, when many were removed from the Blanton’s rotunda. Our project will make the collection viewable again in its entirety as a means of facilitating conversations on the historical and contemporary impact of a large cast collection. The 3D scans of the Battle Casts will make the collection, and these conversations, accessible to a wider Texan audience because they will enter the digital realm as openly accessible objects. The scans of the casts will also permit a new type of engagement with the casts, one more interactive than simple viewing: users will be able to download, color, and otherwise alter the models. In the creation of her exhibit, Lily Cox-Richard scanned, recolored, and recontextualized several classical statues in order to make a statement about how audiences should view representations of the classical canon and the messages they historically convey. Our models will democratize conversations with the casts in a similar way by encouraging interaction with the models through similar means to Cox-Richard’s processes. The casts are currently used as teaching tools in art history and classics courses, much as Battle envisioned when he insisted on their purchase; the models will make this feature more widely available, particularly to students in online courses or people similarly removed from the physical casts, and encourage new ways of incorporating the casts into teaching. Teachers can use them as tools for discussing the classical canon and its reception in Western civilization. Furthermore, they can utilize the coloring feature to develop more accurate and inclusive narratives about polychromy for their students.

We have already taken photogrammetric scans of the current Lily Cox-Richard exhibit *She-Wolf + Lower Figs.,* which leaves the Blanton on December 29, 2019. Our scans capture the ephemerality of Cox-Richard’s artistic intervention with the Blanton Casts and add a new discursive layer to the exhibit. Cox-Richard draped the casts she worked with in multi-colored tulle, which is highly sensitive to light and presents a difficult but intriguing challenge for creating a model in a digital setting where each minute light change effectively creates a different object. The models of the casts themselves aim to be faithful representations, but, as models, they call attention to the fact that they, as well as the casts themselves, are representations that alter the meaning of the original statues, thereby adding new dimensions to conversations regarding the dissemination and reception of the classical world in the contemporary era. Blast from the Casts’ digital capturing of the Blanton Casts, which were always meant to be temporary, intervenes in their temporality to provide a window into the long history of the changing attitudes towards these casts and the current conversations happening in both academia and the public eye about the role of classical antiquity and its representations in contemporary culture.

**Humanities Component**

In 2016, the Ashmolean Museum at the University of Oxford launched a survey project aimed at evaluating the life and significance of replicas and copies in museums, with particular focus on the museum’s extensive plaster cast collection. Much of the 20th century criticism regarding the value of original Greco-Roman sculpture as “more authentic” hinges on the age-old “genius of the artist” trope, in conjunction with the hierarchical value of the precious materials, such as marble or bronze, of the original objects. The premise of the Ashmolean Museum’s project, however, is that the viewer’s experience and the value associated with original art objects is most significantly related to the museum’s treatment of the objects.[[4]](#footnote-4) This can range from where the objects are placed, how they are lit, and what the wall labels proclaim about them.

With an eye towards the future, this project will also hope to push Texas institutions to the forefront of discussions regarding authenticity, museum plaster cast collections and their recent revitalization, and accessibility of classical art objects. Recently, the myth of the Greek and Roman roots of Western civilization has resurged and been used to bolster white nationalist movements. The myth of whiteness perpetuated in classical sculpture has provided a basis for some of these arguments. Continued research into the original context, use, and coloring will help emerging scholars continue to dispel this myth and its distortion for political purposes. Ongoing studies into the polychromy of Classical sculpture, as seen in the work of Vinzenz Brinkmann, have worked to dispel the myth of whiteness that plagues classical sculpture.[[5]](#footnote-5) Specifically in the dissemination and study of plaster casts, the dearth of polychromatic traces risks misinforming the public about their authentic appearance.

In the digitizing of plaster casts, the question of authenticity becomes more complex. In this project, we are dealing with digital copies of plaster copies, in some cases themselves coming from Roman marble copies of Greek bronze originals. As this project will show, through digitization, the casts renew their authenticity by becoming objects that are altogether original. By allowing for colorization options and tutorials, we will also work to combat older discussions of authenticity in plaster casts that are not colored beyond options for veneers. In addition, as digital heritage is not beholden to the same public accessibility and space limitations as a museum, this project will allow for audiences to interact with the plaster casts not in the limited space of a seminar room, but as objects that stand alone and can be studied as creations of the complicated pedagogical values and collecting practices of their historical moment.

**Dissemination**

The first stage of dissemination for our website will be through our partnership with the Blanton; we plan on featuring the project as a temporary exhibition on the Blanton website where classes and individuals across the state can engage with these casts and their history, as well as displaying information about it in the museum’s Battle Seminar Room. We will also include a link and description to our project on the sites for the Departments of Classics and Art and Art History at UT and share it on departmental Facebook, Twitter, and blog pages. Initial efforts will also seek out local and national conferences that encourage and engage with digital humanities projects. Major humanities conferences, including the Archaeological Institute of America (AIA), The College Arts Associations (CAA), and the National Humanities Conference (NHC), have incorporated digital project presentation into their regular programming.

In order to share our work with the broader scholarly community, we will present at the Texas Conference of Digital Libraries. We also intend to engage with the local community, share our resource with the Texas Classical Association, and work with the Blanton Museum Educational Coordinator and local teachers to use the features of our website in non-college courses. Schoolchildren throughout Texas take field trips to the Blanton, and this will provide a valuable educational resource to supplement their engagement with the collection. Suitable for history, studio art, and art history courses, teachers will be able to use it to help students understand the difference between these statues in their original context and the many phases of their reception throughout history. Through engagement with the Battle collection in particular, students can also learn about Texas history and the way these casts, a significant financial investment at the time they were purchased, were a way for the young University of Texas at Austin to claim legitimacy and compete with more established universities on the East Coast. In order to help teachers explain the issues raised by polychromy and the classical canon to their students and actively learn about them through the map and 3D models, we will provide lesson plan guidance on the website.

1. Battle, W.J. “The casts in the Greek Room.” *Alcalde*, February 1896, 4–5. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Victoria Bigliardi. “The Reincarnation of the Aura: Challenging Originality with Authenticity in Plaster Casts of Lost Sculptures.” *International Journal of Semiotics and Visual Rhetoric,* Vol. 1, No. 1 (2017): 72-80. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. [Tessa Krieger-Carlisle](https://blantonmuseum.org/author/tessakriegercarlisle/), “‘Battle’-ing the Importance of Casts.” *Blanton Museum Blog.* 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Milena Melfi, Bert Smith, Sandra Dudley, and Abby Ellis. *Archaeological Plaster Casts: In Search of Authenticity.* October 2016.<https://www.ashmolean.org/archaeological-plaster-casts> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Vinzenz Brinkmann, *Gods in Color: Polychromy in the Ancient World.* DelMonico Books. 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)