



Celtic collections and imperial connections

Sally Foster examines the work of the Victoria & Albert Museum's circulation department in the late 19th century, to explore the reasons behind a growth in the production of plaster casts of early medieval sculpture

With the V&A (Victoria and Albert Museum) at Dundee planning to open by 2016, it is timely to reflect on the earlier role of the V&A in Scotland. At the end of the long 19th century substantial collections of plaster casts of local, early medieval sculpture appeared in quick succession in museums in Ireland, Scotland, Wales and the Isle of Man. These were intended for wide public consumption. The fuel for this came from the so-called Circulation Department of the V&A, which from the 1880s administered grants to 'provincial' museums across Britain and Ireland that were preferentially for 'reproductions': replicas in the form of plaster casts of sculpture, electrotypes of metalwork and fictile ivories. The Circulation Department also facilitated plaster cast production through practical advice and support, as well as lending their collections for temporary display. The motivation was South Kensington's agenda for teaching of art, improving manufactures through technical art,

and wider educational and social benefits through an appreciation of 'high art' (from 1857 to 1899 the V&A was called the South Kensington Museum, and was part of a wider complex of state-funded cultural and scientific institutions that were based in this district of London).

Why replicas?

Today we are often quick to dismiss replicas of archaeological things as inauthentic copies, but their production and exhibition was a very significant and serious enterprise in the long 19th century. The V&A's Cast Court dating from the 1870s is the most famous example of this in the British Isles. Surviving replicas are now historic things in their own right. Behind their creation, circulation, use and after-life lies a series of specific relationships that determined why, when and in what circumstances they were valued, or not. In Scotland, between 1901 and 1911, Glasgow, Dundee and Aberdeen invested in the creation and display of bespoke collections of plaster

The central court of the National Museum of Ireland, as we now know it, in the 1890s. Note the replicas of Irish high crosses

(image courtesy National Museum of Ireland)

casts of Scottish early medieval (post-Roman/pre-Romanesque) sculpture – then commonly referred to as 'Celtic crosses'. This flurry of activity coincided with the tail end of the V&A Circulation Department's dogged advocacy of reproductions, the success and detail of which in Scotland was in no small part down to the professional networking that took place between curators at the annual conference of the newly formed Museums Association. The surviving cast collections embody these important relationships, as we shall see.

From the 1830s, but mainly in the second half of the 19th century, there was an efflorescence of production of plaster casts of early medieval sculptures in Europe, primarily the Isles of Britain and Ireland. Antiquarians, museums and others manufactured, exchanged and circulated these among each other, mainly in Europe between the signatories of the 1867 *Convention for Promoting Universal Reproduction of Works of Art for the Benefit of Museums of all*

Countries, but also the diaspora. The overall trajectory for the production of casts of early medieval material is quite different from that for the Classical and Renaissance material, which has a longer pedigree and is much better studied. Across Europe, 19th-century nations began to define themselves through reference to early medieval history, as most visibly expressed in the creation of their national museums, where display of early medieval material culture, not least sculpture, played a key role. The main catalyst for the initial production of replicas of early medieval material had been the world fairs, beginning with the illustrious London Great Exhibition of 1851. At such fairs replicas of sculpture and metalwork were required for display areas, and in the case of jewellery for sale. For the Dublin Industrial Exhibition of 1853, considerable efforts went into acquiring suitable plaster casts from around Ireland and Great Britain.

The interest in early medieval monuments was as little more than bearers of ornament, and restricted to the Christian monuments

The second half of the 19th century was when interest in early medieval material culture at both an academic and popular level really took off. Casts often fell out of favour after World War I. Their individual fate was always locally determined and institutionally specific but was bound up with the broader debates about the role of different sorts of museums, not least the difference between art and archaeology museums. The fate of this material was also inextricably linked to the emergence and development of different academic disciplines and curatorial professions for which the role of plaster casts, in particular, proved to be something of a high-profile touchstone of difference.

Replicas and identity

From the mid-19th century the burgeoning museum network became one of the key expressions of an emergent localism and, in all but England, national identity. From this time museums first presented the material culture of the early medieval period to the wider public and the first modern scholarship on early medieval sculpture also appeared. Developed mostly from scratch, the creation of collections of plaster casts are therefore important as snapshots in time of what things people thought to be important and, given the political context and subject matter, are of particular relevance for what they may tell us about the use of archaeological material culture in relation to evolving expressions of Scottish identity. At the end of the century, while the creation of casts of early medieval material was not new (see above), the scale and manner of production were.

If we can understand the nature and context of the production of these replicas we can therefore get a better appreciation of the purposes of 19th-century museum collections and develop a critical understanding of how early museums and other emerging professional institutions related to each other at both national and provincial levels

The collections of plaster casts and other replicas that provincial museums acquired and displayed are the product of an environment in which they were encouraged to acquire copies of things — reproduced originals, rather than authentic originals — and in which, in their own words, the 'benighted country curator' benefited from the advice of 'cultured experts', people who delivered imperial objectives determined by those working for what Henry Cole, the founder of the V&A, described as the 'central storehouse or treasury of Science and Art for the use of the whole



Plaster cast of the Nigg Pictish cross-slab in the V&A's Cast Court. Its diverse collection includes a few examples of early medieval sculptures from Britain and Ireland
(© Victoria and Albert Museum, London)

kingdom'. We need to unpack this series of relationships.

My research has probed into what was selected for display in the new Scottish Museums and who and what informed these choices, and why. The possibilities and directions to explore emerged as I worked through and recognised the potential of the surviving evidence: the physical casts themselves, the associated museum and government archives, and contemporary accounts, such as newspapers. Records occasionally included paperwork associated with the *formatori*, plaster moulders who museums commissioned to make the casts for them. These sources provided only dismembered clues about evolving policies, practices, players and their personalities, their actions and impacts, but at an early stage it became clear from the Scottish sources that Robert Ferdinand Martin (1862–1941), an 'Officer of the Circulation' in the V&A, played a critical role. He is someone who does not feature in any V&A institutional histories, and whose appearance in V&A archives is also very slight.

Celtic collections

When the Glasgow International Exhibition opened in 1901, its purpose-built centrepiece, the 'Glasgow Art Galleries', now the Kelvingrove Museum, housed the Fine Art, Scottish History and Archaeology Section. A special section in the west wing was devoted to a



'Selection of Reproductions of the Sculptured Stones of Scotland': 'Eastern Stones', 'Govan Stone', and 'Western Stones'. The creation of this collection was the major new initiative of the Sub-Committee for Scottish History and Archaeology. James Paton, Superintendent of the Museums and Art Galleries of the City of Glasgow, handled some of the practicalities, helped by James Dalrymple Duncan. Dundee's museum collection was in line with the South Kensington ethos: 'To educate in Art, Architecture, Natural History, and Archaeology the inhabitants of Dundee'. On the advice of Professor Gerard Baldwin Brown, an art historian at the University of Edinburgh, and under its curator John Maclauchlan, the Free Library and Museum began acquiring

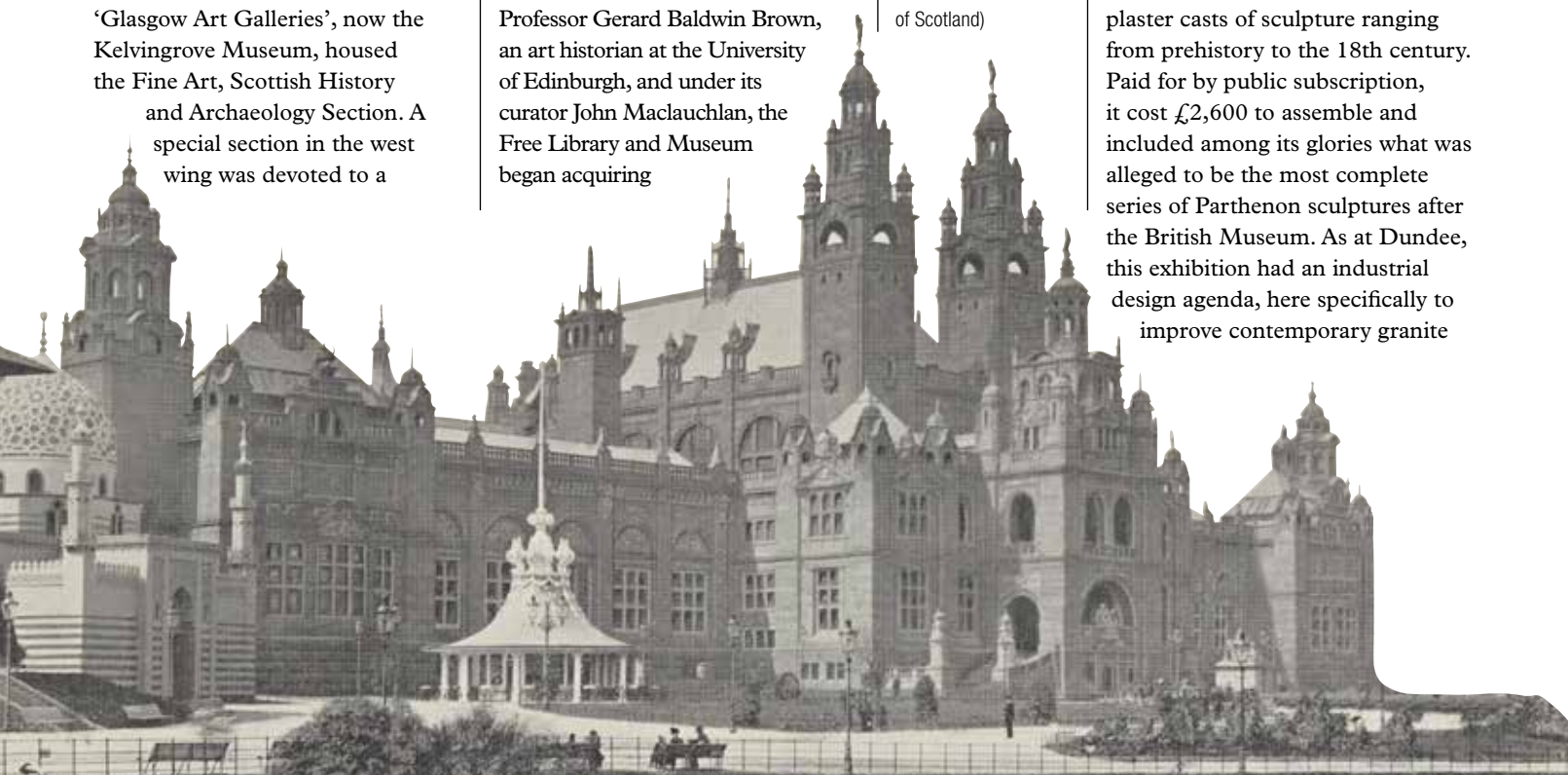
Above: Aberdeen's Celtic Court in 1905

(© Aberdeen Art Gallery & Museum Collections)

Below: An early photograph of Glasgow's Kelvingrove Museum in 1901, shortly after it opened.

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plaster casts of sculpture, electrotypes, autotypes and photographs of art in the 1890s. In 1904 the Dundee Free Library acquired 'a series of casts of the finest Celtic Crosses of Scotland' in a conscious effort to fill a serious blank in their collection, which they displayed to good effect in a new building in 1911. In Aberdeen, a major extension to its Art Gallery and Industrial Museum opened as the Sculpture Gallery in 1905 and was an occasion of immense civic pride, stage-managed by James Murray MP, in particular. The new building housed on its ground floor a large collection of plaster casts of sculpture ranging from prehistory to the 18th century. Paid for by public subscription, it cost £2,600 to assemble and included among its glories what was alleged to be the most complete series of Parthenon sculptures after the British Museum. As at Dundee, this exhibition had an industrial design agenda, here specifically to improve contemporary granite

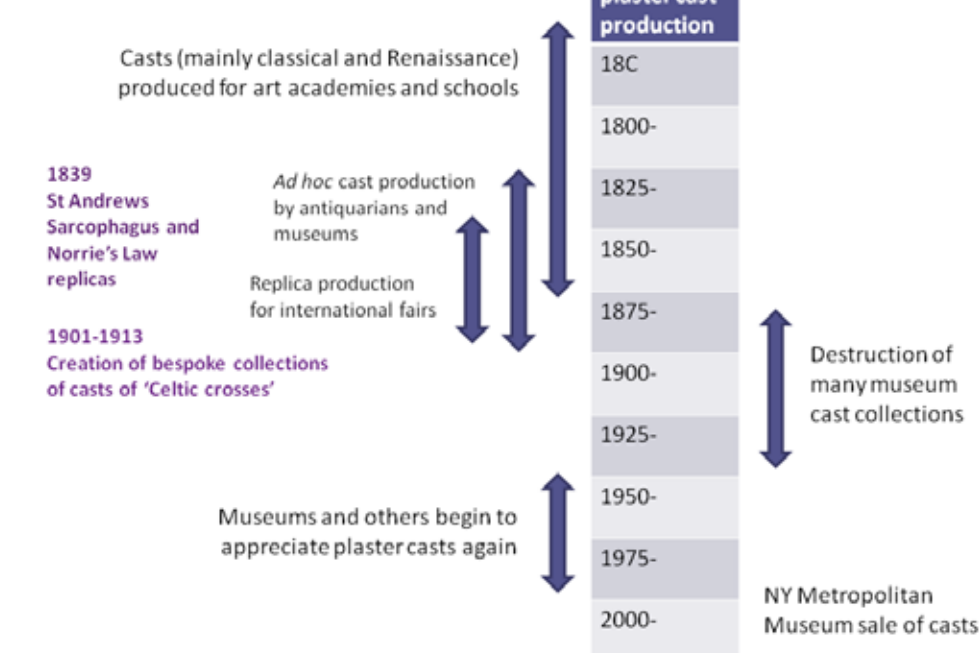


working, which it was argued would improve the wealth of the town where 'There has been an extraordinary lack of invention: and its cemeteries afford fine examples of laborious hideousness'. A 'Celtic Court' comprising fifteen casts was created with this particularly in mind.

I was struck early on by the very strong similarity between the Scottish and early medieval content of the 1904 Dundee and 1905 Aberdeen acquisitions, and in turn between these and what had been procured for Glasgow's larger collection of 1901. Examples of early medieval sculptures that they shared in common include Aberlemno no.2 (churchyard), Iona St John's Cross, Kildalton, Monifieth no.4, Rossie Priory, and St Vigean's no.7. Was this an accident?

Vision & accident?

The derivative nature of Dundee and Aberdeen is explicable if we understand how the V&A's Officers of the Circulation worked – what Martin did. When it came to grants, he advised museums in Scotland on what reproductions they should or could purchase, advised them how to arrange their sculpture galleries, and wrote catalogues for them. When visiting to change and rearrange annual loan collections from the V&A's collection, he also delivered educational art lectures. At Dundee, Martin's 'able and luminous' lantern-slide lectures, delivered before over 500 members



of the public, were 'an arrangement which has been so much appreciated by teachers, pupils, and citizens'. Local staff appreciated the expertise offered: 'Away here, so far north, we have no easy opportunities of seeing examples, or of knowing which is the right place to apply to'. Aberdeen gave Martin virtually a free hand – he drew up a list for Sir George Reid to approve, before organising the procurement, arrangement and cataloguing of the casts. Most of this he appears to have done in his own time.

Procuring casts most commonly involved getting casts made from existing moulds, or sometimes getting sculptures newly moulded, and arranging access to these. From his role and informed by his V&A

Summary of the fortunes of plaster casts of sculpture (positive developments on the left, negative on the right)

(© S. Foster)

training and contacts, Martin was in a position to advise on what sculptures it was desirable for a gallery to include; from his grant work he also knew what had already been cast, and where existing moulds might be. If necessary, a new plaster cast would also be made by moulding an existing plaster cast, and this seems to be the case for several of the Aberdeen and Dundee casts. The trajectories of authentic originals and their original reproductions can be complicated, and require detective work and careful observation to establish the precise relationships.

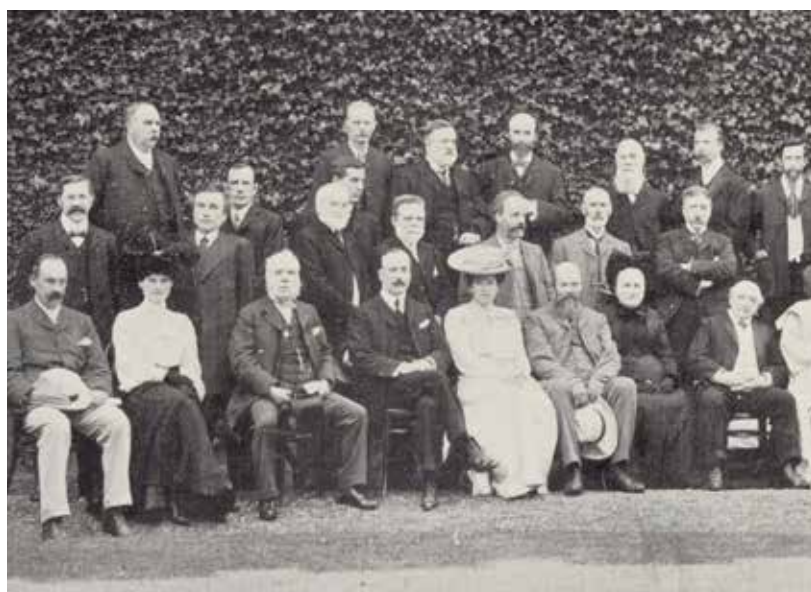
The V&A funded the Glasgow 1901 casts, so Martin is likely to have been involved. The V&A also paid for the Dundee casts and this is exactly the same time that Martin's star rose and he was ordering the casts for a whole new museum in Aberdeen. What Martin appears to have done for Dundee and Aberdeen is to piggy-back, in good V&A fashion, on his knowledge of the pre-existing casts made for Glasgow, and who made them (notably Messrs D. and J. MacKenzie of Glasgow).

Associations

It took a systematic review of the early journals of the Museums Association to better appreciate the museological context in which the 'Celtic' and other casts collections appeared. Serendipitously – and

Early museum networking: detail of a 1903 photograph of the Museums Association delegates at Norwich Castle. Paton top row, second from right; MacLauchlan and his wife front row, fourth from left; by process of elimination, Martin and his wife sit at the extreme left

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After he left the V&A and became an antique dealer, R.F. Martin acquired headed notepaper designed by Eric Gill. It depicts St Martin sharing his cloak with a beggar. Whether Gill and Martin intended it or not, it is a fitting visual metaphor for Martin's career in the Circulation Department where he divided, shared and circulated part of the nation's 'treasury'

(© Victoria and Albert Museum, London)

critically – this also revealed how the individual key actors I had recognised in my other sources were networking. Paton was the initiator of the Association, which from its formation in 1890 had an active Scottish presence on its Council until 1907: Paton (Glasgow), Maclauchlan (Dundee) and Murray (Aberdeen), all at some point also acting as President or Vice-President. The Association met in Glasgow (1896), Edinburgh

from 1893 Martin joined in his *individual* capacity and attended the meetings assiduously, often accompanied by this wife. He became Vice-President in 1905. More so than any of his Circulation Department colleagues, Martin had the opportunity to develop friendships and professional networks with the staff of the provincial museums. Reading the Proceedings of the Museums Association and its successor the *Museums Journal*

Some effort was seemingly made at Glasgow to cast a range of monument forms, although the art on Pictish symbol-bearing stones was of little interest, except one of the bulls from Burghead

(1901), and Aberdeen (1903). The Associates comprised institutions and individuals who might work for institutions that would not or felt they could not join (this presumably applied to the national bodies). Glasgow joined in 1890, Dundee in 1891 and Aberdeen in 1908. The V&A did not join as an institution in this period, but

provides a vivid sense of the energy of the Association's members, their critical reflection on their professional concerns, as well as its wider benefits.

Choices

The Dundee and Aberdeen exhibitions are what the V&A expected of South Kensington-inspired displays. There was a proselytising and dominant South

Kensington way of looking at art (see for example Owen Jones' 1856 *Grammar of Ornament*). Art teaching actively used the collections in local art and industrial museums set up for this purposes. The emphasis on selection of material for museums was therefore on types of ornament that manufacturers and craftspeople could apply to contemporary objects, whose beauty and taste could inspire the public. The interest in early medieval monuments was as little more than bearers of ornament, and restricted to the Christian monuments.

By contrast, Glasgow's exhibition did not have the specific agenda of improving the taste of a nation. Instead, it aimed to promote Scottish history and archaeology to an international audience through a general collection illustrative of, among others things, the country and people of Scotland in prehistoric as well as historic times. Glasgow also needed a collection that would be a legacy for its new Kelvingrove Museum.

Its selection had not been made by Martin, but by a local antiquarian, antiquarian Robert Chellas Graham (best known for his *The Carved Stones of Islay*), who took advice behind the scenes from Romilly Allen, one half of the magisterial 1903 *The Early Christian Monuments of Scotland*. Although the criteria determining the Glasgow selection were quite different, Martin largely worked from this existing canon of casts to select for Aberdeen and Dundee.

Some effort was seemingly made at Glasgow to cast a range of monument forms, although the art on Pictish symbol-bearing stones was of little interest, except one of the bulls from Burghead, and simple cross-incised stones were then, as they have been until recent times, under-appreciated.

Conclusions

There are various explanations for why provincial museums around Britain and Ireland, some of which are now national museums, took such an active interest in the acquisition of casts of early



medieval sculpture at this time. The co-incidence of the maturing study of early medieval sculpture and an awakening sense of national identities made 'Celtic' sculpture perfect for creating and promoting cultural resources distinctive to the countries, and had become a source of inspiration for Celtic Revival artists and craftspeople, primarily from the 1880s.

The 'horizon' of newly created 'Celtic' collections is a striking example of what Murray Pittock in his *The Celtic Identity and the British Image* calls 'imperial localism', the idea that 'local colour accentuated the glory of the Empire through stressing how many cultures it contained, and was welcome'.

There is no hint of resistance or lack

by 1905/6, Liverpool Museum in 1913). A significant factor was that the V&A Circulation Department still assiduously pedalled grants for provincial museums to acquire reproductions.

A critical vector for the last flourish of this fashion was the additional networking opportunities presented by the Museums Association with its annual cycle of meetings. These facilitated and deepened a very specific set of short-lived relationships in which the production of plaster casts of sculpture, particularly early medieval sculpture, was valued and came to the fore in Scotland.

R.F. Martin may not feature in V&A institutional histories, but he made a considerable difference

Above: Edwardian postcard of James Taggart granite works, Aberdeen

(Image courtesy Aberdeen City Libraries)

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Further reading

Vision & Accident. The Story of the Victoria and Albert Museum A. Burton (London, 1999)

S.M. Foster, 'Circulating agency: The V&A, Scotland and the multiplication of 'Celtic crosses', *Journal of the History of Collections*, 27 (forthcoming; advance access April 2014, DOI: 10.1093/jhc/fhu008)

E. McCormick, "'The highly interesting series of Irish crosses': reproductions of early medieval Irish sculpture in Dublin and Sydenham' in J. Hawkes (ed.), *Making Histories. Proceedings of the Sixth International Conference on Insular Art* (Donington, 2013), 358–71

Irish High Crosses Exhibition National Museum of Ireland (Dublin, 2010)

The main catalyst for the reproduction of replicas of early medieval material had been the World Fairs, beginning with the illustrious London Great Exhibition of 1851

of free choice in the shared 'Celtic' enterprises of the V&A, Glasgow, Dundee and Aberdeen.

While across the world, art curators in particular were now furiously debating the value of casts, museums in Britain and Ireland began creating their 'Celtic' cast collections (Wales from 1894, Ireland 1898–1910, the Isle of Man

to those he worked with in the provinces. Through understanding the work of the V&A's Circulation Department in Scotland, and how individual provincial museums functioned, we can begin to appreciate the many layers of human stories that such replicas embed and the considerable past human energies they embody.