

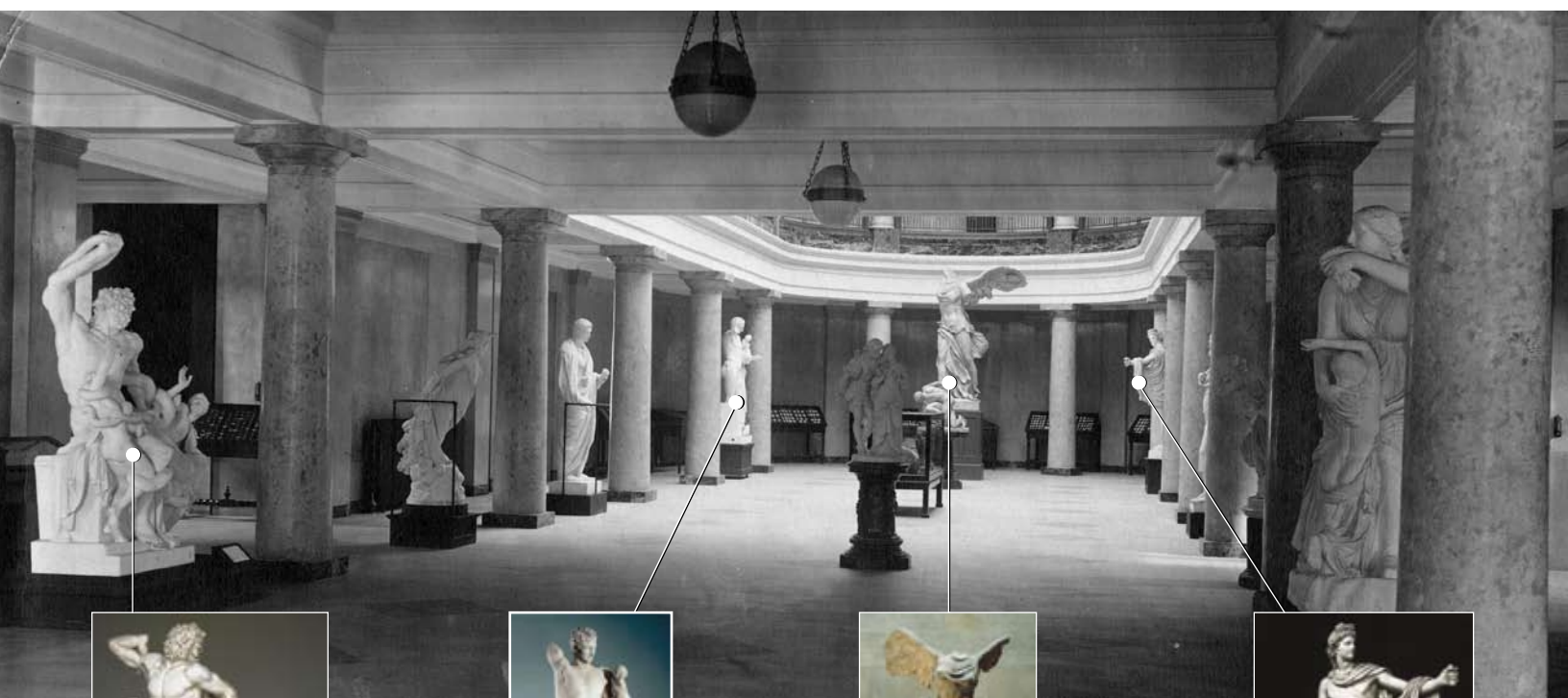
Nydia in A Changing Museum



In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, casts were considered to be especially important at universities and colleges, which emphasized classical studies in their curriculums. By their senior year, all Michigan students had worked their way through a great deal of Greek and Latin literature and to animate their study of antiquity, classics professor Henry Frieze acquired many casts. Soon the University became involved with this project and the newly assembled collection was put on display in a specially renovated portion of the old North College (Mason Hall); this was the nucleus of the University of Michigan's art collection. After being removed from the Museum, the University's casts were destroyed or lost due to poor storage conditions.

Nydia, the *Blind Flower Girl of Pompeii* has been a highlight of the Museum since 1862. Though today she is surrounded by paintings, earlier in the twentieth century our marble Nydia kept company with a group of plaster casts—full-scale replicas of some of the most famous examples of ancient sculpture. The long tradition of making casts began when some important ancient sculptures were rediscovered, to the astonishment of the public, in the Renaissance; copies were made and disseminated to art schools throughout Europe, where they came to have a huge influence on the training of artists. By the nineteenth century, casts were routinely bought by private art collectors, and museums such as the Victoria and Albert in London began to systematically identify, copy, and install important works.

The casts populating the central gallery around 1910 included such iconic classical works as the *Laocoön* (front left), *Hermes and the Infant Dionysus* (back left), the *Nike of Samothrace* (back center), the *Apollo Belvedere* (back right—his arm is just visible extending between two columns), and the *Farnese Hercules* (center front).



Laocoön and His Sons
(Vatican Museums, Italy).



Hermes and the Infant Dionysus
(Archaeological Museum, Olympia).



Nike or "Winged Victory" of Samothrace
(Louvre Museum, Paris).



Apollo Belvedere
(Vatican Museums, Italy).



Abbott Handerson Thayer, *A Virgin*, 1892-1893 (Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.).

In the nineteenth century, most successful artists studied casts and models as part of their training and felt free to copy these sculptures in their work. The central figure in Thayer's *A Virgin*, for example, is based on the *Nike of Samothrace* (previous page), only in place of wings the artist has used clouds billowing behind his central figure. When the distinguished Michigan art collector Charles Lang Freer purchased this work, he was proud to acknowledge Thayer's visual quotation by ordering a plaster cast of the *Nike of Samothrace* to be prominently displayed beside it in his home. That cast, later donated to the Museum, is visible floating above Marion LeRoy Burton, the fifth president of the University of Michigan, as he lay in state following his death in February 1925.

In the second half of the nineteenth century casts became an integral component of American museums seeking to illustrate the history of Western art. Not only did they provide viewers lacking the means or leisure to travel to Europe with an excellent opportunity to see canonical works of sculpture, they also allowed close analysis of details and a sense of scale not possible in photographs. No stigma was attached to these reproductions and they were prominently displayed for the education of the public in major museums such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. Nineteenth-century donors even gave money for the specific purpose of collecting high quality casts, often commissioned and purchased in Europe, where they were made by skilled workers using piece molds from the originals that captured even the most minute details. Nydia's setting is very different now because by the 1920s collecting practice had shifted away from reproductions to acquiring original works of art and plaster casts were no longer displayed.



Marion LeRoy Burton laying in state in the apse of the University of Michigan Museum of Art, 1925.

Developed with support from the Institute of Museum and Library Services, the Getty Foundation, and other generous donors.

Photos: UMMA apse with plaster casts and apse with casket of Marion LeRoy Burton from the Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan; all other images from ArtStor.