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The Power of Material and Context: Large-Scale Copies After the Antique in the Late Eighteenth Century

Abstract Since the Renaissance, plaster casts of ancient statues have been, in a certain sense, the archetypes of artistic serial production: as such, they are copies par excellence. Their use and distribution underwent several surges in popularity over time, a fact that throws important light on their valuation as "copies" in the different regional and temporal contexts. In the short period between the middle and end of the eighteenth century, in the German-speaking world, a fundamental shift in the distribution and accessibility of large-scale ancient sculptures took place. Plaster casts, which had become available in previously unimagined quantities after the Seven Years' War ended in 1763, played a central role in this shift.

To display works in the open air, durable materials—such as papier mâché, terracotta, iron, so-called "firm earth," and stone, which were praised for being cheap and permanent—were needed. The technical possibilities and the materials used were the subject of a discourse which reflected on the effects of the industrial revolution. Through the division of labour, manufacturing and craft production—rather than the artist—came to the fore. In the evaluations during the period, the production technique itself, rather than the artistic achievement of a single person, gained importance. This paper is devoted to exploring these large casts and copied statues, the size of which was comparable to their ancient models, and to the question of how materials and production techniques, as well as the context of use, define both their status as "copies" and their influence on the reception of ancient sculpture in this era.

Keywords Plaster casts, cast iron, Toreutica, Wörlitz, central Germany, eighteenth century

Since the Renaissance, plaster casts of ancient statues have been, in a certain sense, the archetypes of copies. Because they are created from moulds taken from an "original," they should seemingly be able to faithfully transmit its qualities. Their use and distribution underwent real booms that throw important light on how they were valued as "copies" in the contexts of different regions and periods.[1] This paper is therefore devoted to the question of which criteria—apart from "faithfulness"—have the power to push the copy beyond that of a mere effigy of an artwork that is considered "original."

Shifting from the notion of plaster casts as faithful substitutes for an absent original to the ossuaries of dead gods, the history of plaster casts is full of deep breaks and changes in their appreciation. The mass production of plaster casts in the nineteenth century, in particular, seems to be an almost ideal-typical illustration of Walter Benjamin's dictum of the loss of the aura of the original artwork in the era of its mechanical replicability. This finds its connection in the desperate efforts to get rid of the casts in the Victoria & Albert Museum in the late nineteenth century, or of the proposal, just a little later, to drop the casts of Berlin's Neues Museum into the Spree river.[2] These negative judgments have retrospectively cast a shadow over the use of plaster casts in previous eras, too.[3]

The history of scholarship adds further complications to the study of casts of ancient sculpture. In the tradition of classical archaeology, there is a deep-rooted idea that a copy of an artwork should be assessed above all for its closeness in style and motifs to the exemplary original—that is, for its "exactness." This notion was at the heart of the *Kopienkritik* of the nineteenth century, which aimed to sift through the profusion of Roman statues to identify the Greek originals hidden behind them. The results seemed to confirm Winckelmann's picture of the decadence of Roman art. According to Winckelmann's neoclassical concept, Greek art of the fifth and fourth century B.C.E. built the core of ideal, exemplary art. This ideal had a strong impact on contemporary art, which had to imitate the Ancients to become great.[4]

If we can set aside these notions when we consider post-antique copies of ancient sculptures, we can open up new, productive ways of viewing copies which allow us to understand them as intentional artworks. This helps us to gain a deeper understanding of their transformative possibilities in respective, contemporary contexts. In the introduction to the essay

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1 This essay is based on studies on the history of fabrication and the trade of plaster casts and copies around 1800 undertaken in the context of the Collaborative Research Centre 644: Transformations of Antiquity at Humboldt University Berlin. Many aspects are discussed in Schreiter 2014 b, which serves as a point of reference. The intention of this essay is to clarify those points which refer to a broader understanding of the transformative power of copies after the Antique—in so far as Antiquity is seen as a foreign and thus distant culture.

2 Schreiter 2012, 17 with references.

3 Schreiter 2011, 105–106.

4 Bartsch, Becker, and Schreiter 2010, 3–6.

collection *Das Originale der Kopie*, the authors attempted not only to analyse relations of dependence between originals and their copies, but to establish the conditions in which the copies were created, their materials, and their contexts of use. The working assumption was that such copies underwent a transformation through an allelopoietic process, in which the original is first created as such through copying.[5]

Using the example of plaster casts and the large-scale copies of ancient statues they were able to produce, this article aims to explore in detail, through several steps, how copying constitutes a prototype as an "original." These casts are an expression of a commercial and artistic boom in the late eighteenth century, which saw a fundamental shift in the distribution and accessibility of large-scale ancient sculpture after the Seven Years' War ended in 1763. In a kind of "second use," these works provided a stock of moulds that were used for creative imitations and copies in other materials such as iron, terracotta and papier mâché.[6]

This period was shaped by the publication of the works of Johann Joachim Winckelmann, so it would be possible to approach these copies with a simplified explanatory model, namely as being secondary expressions of the appreciation of ancient art that was central to German neoclassicism. In this view, their cheap materials, serial production, and allegedly low artistic quality would preclude granting them the status of a serious subject of research. Indeed, when these works were noticed at all, they were regarded as the "bread and butter" commercial business of court artists, which enabled them to make money on the side.[7] To the contrary, I wish to trace the development of these works' creation, distribution, marketing, and buyer interest, viewing this development against the foil of classicising art theory and using Italy and England as two points of reference.

In the eighteenth century, the attention of collectors and antiquaries throughout Europe was directed primarily toward Italy, the land from which many antiquities originated, and in particular on Rome.[8] From 1763 to 1796, that is, the period from the end of the Seven Years' War to the annexation of Italy by Napoleon, there was a sharp rise in the number of travellers to Italy and the frequency of their journeys. The acquisition of art and souvenirs was as integral to these journeys as were visits to ancient sites.[9] It was the English aristocracy in particular that ensured the continuing health of this market. Alongside the formation of larger collections, the acquisition of ancient art also became an element of furnishing a country house, where works would be adapted to the requirements of the collector's own environment.[10]

5 Bartsch, Becker, and Schreiter 2010.
6 Schreiter 2014b, 261–384.
7 Schreiter 2014 b, 13–15 (Introduction).
8 Here and for the following argumentation, see Bignamini and Hornsby 2011, 1–8.
9 Wilton and Bignamini 1996, 21–30.
10 Especially Coltman 2006, 135–147, and passim.

In order to grasp the specific use of "the Antique" in German duchies and princedoms, apart from Winckelmanian theorising, it is vital to answer the question of how available ancient sculpture—or at least large-scale plaster casts—was at the end of the eighteenth century. Germany was coming from a completely different position, as the possession of ancient art, especially sculpture, was less common in general. One of the few German collections of ancient sculpture was acquired in 1728, for the King of Saxony, August the Strong, to be housed in Dresden.[11] Alongside the few collections of original ancient sculptures and the combination of plaster casts and copies found in the setting of libraries and art collections, plaster cast collections became established in the last third of the eighteenth century through the foundation of small art academies and drawing schools. Probably the best known of these was the Mannheim Antikensaal, which opened in 1767.[12]

In the following period, participation in the distribution of ancient art, which spread to ever-wider circles, became of key importance. At first, supply was not sufficient to meet the demands that arose from the reorganisation and creation of courts and residences, as well as from art academies, which sought to be well-equipped. Business took a decisive turn with the appearance of travelling Italian plaster casters, the so-called *formatori*, who could be found in towns all over Germany from the 1760s on. It is in this context that we find the first mention of the *Fratelli Ferrari*. With their appearance on the scene, the situation changed. Originally from Milan, they appeared on the German art scene more or less out of nowhere in the mid-1760s. The Ferraris differed from other *formatori* in that they had their own, re-usable moulds.[13]

The range of items on offer consisted of busts and a few complete statues that were probably moulded from bronze copies after the antiques that were present in Germany, such as the Kassel bronze of the Dancing Faun. The Ferrari very soon won a reputation for having unparalleled artistic skill. Their range formed the basis for further copies, whose dependence on the original source was thus merely indirect.[14]

The Leipzig art dealer Carl Christian Heinrich Rost had a key role in the dissemination of their design repertoire and also made attempts to use other materials profitably. When the Ferraris travelled to Leipzig in 1777, he bought their moulds and made a contract with them that they would never trade in Leipzig again. He set up his own workshop to make plaster casts and advertised the products throughout the country in extensive, annotated catalogues.[15]

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11 Schreiter 2014 b, 394–395.
12 Schreiter 2010, 125–126; Schreiter 2014 b, 56–60.
13 Schreiter 2010, 127–133; for more detail, see Schreiter 2014b, 108–133, with complete bibliography.
14 For the specific range of sculptures sold by the Ferrari, see Schreiter 2014b,119–123 and 803–813 (Tabelle 1).
15 Schreiter 2010, 133–134 and Schreiter 2014b, 133–142 and 816–843 (Tabelle 2).

After setting up his plaster cast workshop, Rost began to expand the Fratelli Ferrari's programme. At the beginning of the 1780s, the Elector of Saxony granted him permission to make moulds from the statues in the Dresden collection of ancient art.[16]

A driving force behind the popularisation of Antique art was the widespread wish to adorn not only palaces and houses but, increasingly, parks and gardens with adequate decoration. This demand required the development of weatherproof materials. Of course Rost was one of the first to establish such materials but he was soon surpassed by others. He had the advantage that he could draw on his stock to produce sculptures in larger quantities, and in a material resistant to weathering—what he called a *feste Masse* (firm mass).[17]

Local art manufactories and court artists seeking to make money on the side tested a wide range of materials such as papier mâché, terracotta, iron, stone and firm earths, which were praised as being both a good value and durable. A hierarchy among the materials became ever more strongly established. Around the manufactory, which with its directly-employed workers formed the "core" of such production, there were a number of more or less free-lance artists and craftworkers who took on special tasks such as preparing moulds or gilding. In the manufactory, the division of labour, and not the artist, took centre stage. An assured command of production technique, rather than the artistic achievement of the individual, became important. The technical possibilities and materials used were the subject of a discourse of their own, which reflected on the effects of the industrial revolution.[18]

Enlarging the traditional question of the relationship to and "truthfulness" of a copy when confronted with its original or model, the study of copies becomes even more fruitful when additional aspects are considered. During the late eighteenth Century, the effects of an upcoming international art market, a growing consumer culture, technical developments in the art industry, and the use of "new" experimental materials shaped the relation to the Antique. Beyond the mere theoretic approach of art criticism, these developments reveal the widespread popularisation of ancient art as defined by its use in public and private surroundings. Transformed by their adaptation to the environments of the people concerned—which more often meant the up and coming bourgeoisie—the "business of copies" gets an impulse to flood Europe.

Again, it was comparisons with the English market that shaped references to taste and consumer goods. In 1787, a detailed notice appeared in the *Journal des Luxus und der Moden*, advertising architectural elements and sculptures made of Coade stone, a terracotta developed in the manufactory of Mrs. Eleanor Coade in Lambeth, London, which could be produced

16 Schreiter 2014b, 143–155, figs. 58–82.
17 Schreiter 2014b, 182–185.
18 Schreiter 2014b, 424–431.

in large formats and was resistant to weathering. Through the advertisement, the Weimar businessman and editor of the journal, Friedrich Justin Bertuch, was attempting to establish these goods on the German market.[19] Bertuch published a complete list of the wares offered by the Coade Stone Manufactory, but evidently not a single item was ordered from Germany. This was in part because, parallel to the appearance of the journal announcements, Bertuch had the Weimar court sculptor Martin Gottlieb Klauer develop a competitive rival product locally. By 1789, statues were being locally produced from "toreutica," a hard-fired, weatherproof terracotta that cost barely a quarter of the English wares.[20]

Although the technical qualities of "toreutica" were derived directly from Coade stone, the selection of ancient prototypes drew primarily on the product range that Rost had on offer in Leipzig, and not on the range offered by the English manufactory. This duality of sources—England for the technical requirements, and Italy, or rather Saxonian Italy with the Dresden casts from Rost's art dealership for the formal prototypes—thus reflected how another specific development resulted in new levels of the established patterns and roles, ranging from *Italianità* to Englishness.

The various manufactories and workshops had close ties with one another, and not just through their shared dependence on Rost's stock of prototypes. It is thus no surprise that an important comment on toreutica ware comes from Count Detlev Carl von Einsiedel, who in December 1790 wrote to Bertuch: "zu der neuen gebrannten Masse habe ich ihrer Feinheit und Zähigkeit halber viel Vertrauen. Und ich freue mich, daß auch in dieser Art die alten Kunst=Stücke dauerhaft vervielfältigt werden sollen" (I have great confidence in the new, fired mass as regards its fineness and toughness, and I am pleased that the ancient artworks should be multiplied permanently in this way, too).[21]

The Count of Einsiedel ran an ironworks in Lauchhammer, where from 1784 he had been producing cast iron statues from models of ancient sculptures. He was well-travelled, but had not been to Italy. Ancient culture therefore reached him, too, only indirectly and he became one of Rost's customers like everyone else. His interest in technical developments provided the necessary basis for producing the iron sculptures (after the antique) that were made by his foundry.[22]

It was the reproduction of an ancient prototype, its multiplication, that extended the force of classical antiquity and disseminated it in the regional context. Reproduction and copy reinforced the positive qualities of the classical world that inspired them, while the similarity of the reproduced products reassured owners and users by including them in a regional system of references that encompassed both subjects and materials.

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19 *Ueber Herrn Coade's Lithodipira*, 1787 (Schreiter 2014b, 721, Dok. 30).
20 Schreiter 2014b, 338–346.
21 Weimar, Goethe-Schiller-Archiv, GSA 06/426, Brief 1 (September 1790); s.a. Schreiter 2014b, 344.
22 Schreiter 2014 b, 297–305.

What is particularly intriguing about these “functional antiques,” however, is their range of uses. In the most varied contexts, different value was ascribed to them, but this did not cause them to be devalued or regarded as shop-worn in comparison to the exemplary originals on which they were based.[23] Multiplication in broader, manufactory-like workshops marked the way to an exuberant creativity in remodelling items to be suitable for their respective use. Copying thus helped realize the potential of the original without cutting the connection. Because the antique remained present even in the most surprising reinterpretations, its transformative power was developed even further.

An exceptionally popular piece was the so-called “Vestal bearing the sacred fire,” the original of which is held in the Museo Capitolino in Rome. In Germany, the piece became widely known in the form of a creative imitation by the Gotha court sculptor Friedrich Wilhelm Doell, which he had created in Gotha after an imitation of the same piece by Jean-Antoine Houdon (fig. 1).

This item, along with other sculptures from Doell’s workshop, was announced in 1797 in the *Buergerlicher Baumeister*, with a “Verzeichnis der Statuen, Büsten und Vasen, welche bey dem Herrn Hof-Bildhauer Doell in Altenburg von weissen gebrannten Thon für die beygesetzten Preise in Louisd’or á fünf Thlr. zu haben sind und sowohl zur Verzierung der Zimmer, als zum Aufputz der Gärten gebraucht werden können” (List of the statues, busts, and vases that can be had from the Court Sculptor Doell in Altenburg in white fired clay for the noted prices in Louis d’or at five thalers, and which can be used both for decorating rooms and for adorning gardens). There is also another reference to a comment about using the statue as an oven decoration: “23. Eine Vestalin, welche das heilige Feuer trägt, ganz bekleidet, vorzüglich zu Oefen geschickt” (No. 23. A Vestal which bears the sacred fire, fully clothed, eminently suitable for ovens).[24] By taking the bowl with the fire as an attribute of the vestal virgin as a guardian of the sacred fire and—as a priestess of Vesta—also of the domestic hearth, there is thus also a reference to her function. This work is a striking illustration of how this type of classicised new creation was accorded equal standing with the corresponding ancient original, and also of how well such works could be adapted to each context of use.

In 1791, in Wörlitz, an example was acquired from Rost in Leipzig and integrated into a quite different kind of context. Beneath the ‘Stein’, the artificial volcano, and down a spiral staircase, the visitor arrived in the Cabinet of the Night, which was described by August Rode in 1798 as follows (fig. 2): “Fußboden und Wände schwarz, mit rotgelblichen Figuren verziert: in der Mitte eine blendendweiße Bildsäule auf schwarzem Fußgestelle: Das Gewölbe der Decke, gleich dem nächtlichen Himmel, durch

23 Becker 2009, and passim.
24 Schmidt, vol. 3, 1797, 20–21 (Schreiter 2014 b, 742, Dok. 41); for the Vestal, see also Schreiter 2014b, 417–419, fig. 147; 629–630, Kat. 218.

Figure 1: Vestale "Carrying the holy fire," *Kabinett der Nacht*, Wörlitz, plaster cast in Dessau (depot).

Mond und Sterne erleuchtet." (The floor and walls are black, decorated with reddish-yellow figures: in the middle there is a dazzling white ornamented column on a black, footed stand: the vault of the ceiling, like the night sky, lights up with the moon and stars).[25] In this example, the bowl was originally made separately, probably from a translucent alabaster. There was a candle in it which lit up the night.

The same prototype offered multiple possibilities for adapting and fitting it to a required form or content, as could also be shown with many other examples. Large numbers of abbreviations and transformations can

25 Rode 1798, 213–214.

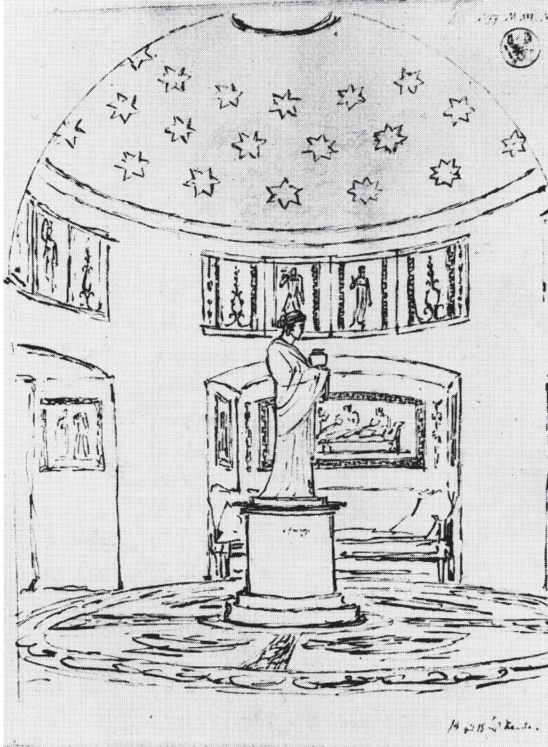

Figure 2: Vestale "Carrying the holy fire," *Kabinett der Nacht*, Wörlitz, after a lost drawing by Friedrich Gilly.

be identified, and indeed they are one of the principal characteristics of mechanically replicated large-scale copies after the antique in this era and region. Despite the high level of recognisability of the individual piece, the contexts of use render the copy independent in *this* location and in *this* function. The copies take on a double function when they are also assigned functions of their own within their new context that extend beyond their source and their actual (or assigned) original meaning. The reference to the ancient prototypes is a kind of umbilical cord through which a range of possible interpretations can be nourished but also formulated anew in the context of a changed environment. This observation can be compared with Falser's analysis, also in this volume, of Angkor Wat plaster casts from the end of the nineteenth century, which confirms the importance of considering a changed environment in order to grasp the transformative power of the copy.

Copies after the antique in alternative materials can be described only partially by the choice of prototype and its meaning. The choice of material itself was debated, as a piece's permanence, which was necessary for display in the open air, was lent to the "regional" classicism created by the

establishment of local repertoires of prototypes. The fact that a material was available locally was often the decisive factor in the decision to attempt new techniques and produce objects from it. Whether the material was a "raw material" (e.g. iron, clay, or paper) was cheap, or at least cheaper than the materials hitherto used (e.g. bronze, marble, or lead), did not cause the end product to be regarded as being of lesser value. Materials were compared with each other and these comparisons were not aimed primarily to excuse them in relation to materials or regions that were assumed to be of higher value.[26]

This discourse about the permanence of the material was conducted, above all, in the journal articles of the era.[27] Copies in marble and bronze were rare, but manufactories offered their casts and copies in various colours, each of which aimed to create the illusion of being constructed from these or other materials. Plaster was blackened and iron or papier-mâché bronzed to give the impression of bronze. A white finish was assumed to resemble marble. Techniques such as gilding and the white enamelling of cast iron to imitate porcelain were also practiced. The material of the sculpture itself could generally not be perceived for its own sake (fig. 3). It was thus possible to set in the open air a sculpture that looked like marble but which was also durable. In this way, the quality of the given material was implemented visually, though it did not necessarily correspond to the quality of the actual material. Through this, too, copies after the antique were highly adaptable to suit their use.

The decisive criteria in creating copies after the antique were the link to the original, the production technique, and the choice of material; each of these aspects might become more prominent and debated according to occasion and need.

Only with the effects of the Napoleonic campaigns did this development come to an end. It was not military defeat or the explicit destruction of the manufactories that brought about this change, but rather the improved range of ancient prototypes that became available when the transport of Italian antiquities to Paris, and the moulds made in the Atelier de Moulage, pushed the regional range of designs into the background.[28] If we move beyond considering the relationship between an original and its copy, our view widens to include larger repertoires of sculptures produced in quasi-industrial processes and modelled on ancient prototypes; we see that their selection, design, and production were prompted by the impulse to disseminate classical antiquity in a way befitting its exemplary status, or, in the words of the Count of Einsiedel, "die Stärken des Althertums in der Sculptur sich zu vervielfältigen" (to multiply the strengths of antiquity in sculpture),[29] which means more than just classicising decorative figures to

26 Cf. Schreiter 2014b, 424–427.
27 Schreiter 2014b, 424–427.
28 Schreiter 2014a, 37–38.
29 Ibid.

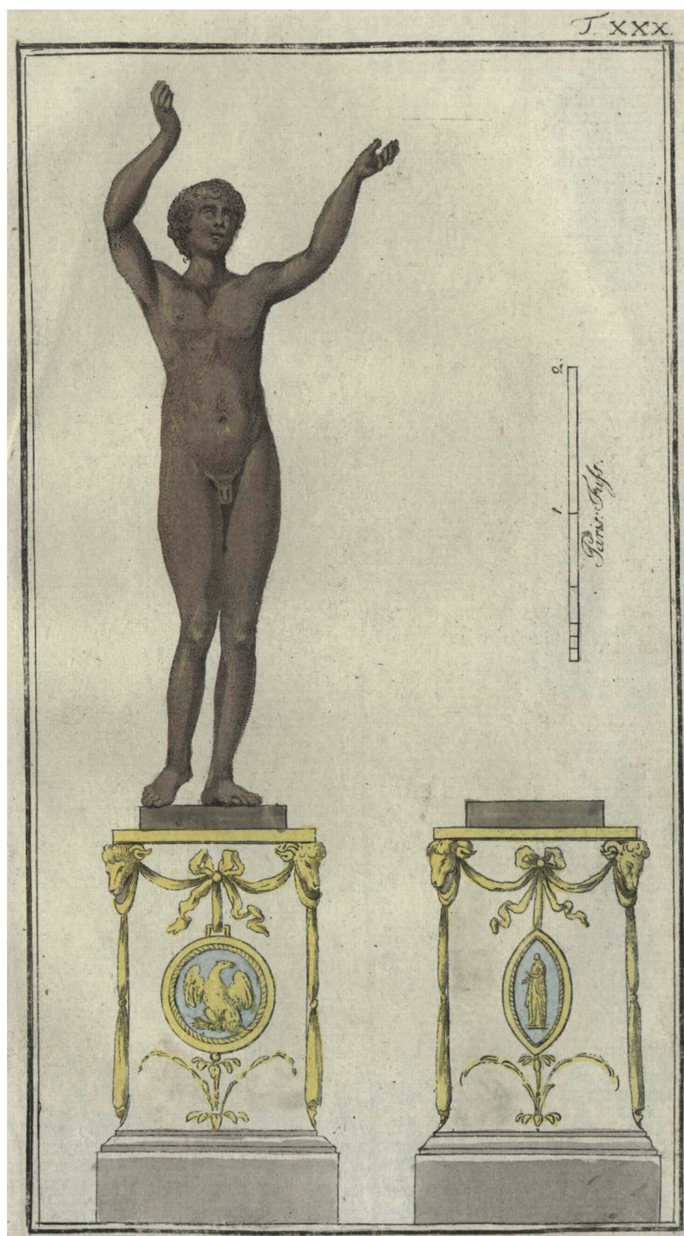

Figure 3: Ganymed (Praying Boy), Lauchhammer iron cast,
advertisement in *Journal der Moden*, October 1786.

fill up a scene. Against the foil of contemporary art theory and antiquarian discussions, sculptures that were also understood as commercial wares became established in ways that had their own logic.

Figures

Fig. 1: Schreiter 2014, 418, fig. 147 c.
Fig. 2: Schreiter 2014, 418, fig. 147 a.
Fig. 3: *Journal der Moden,* October 1786, pl. XXX.

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“Ueber Herrn Coade’s Lithodipira, oder Kunst-Backstein-Fabrick zu Lambeth in England.” 1787. *Journal der Moden* (May 1787): 171–173. (= hier: Dok. 30)