

## **“Spoiled Incurably for Want of a Six-penny Feather Brush”: the Rise and Fall of Ireland’s Collections of Plaster Casts**

This paper will investigate Ireland’s institutional collections of plaster casts from the eighteenth to the twenty-first centuries, many of which began as private collections such as those accumulated during wealthy aristocrats’ Grand Tours through Europe. It will specifically address the function of the individual collections, including the transition of many from private to public: most of the assemblages eventually morphed into either objects for the education of artists (such as would eventually become the National College of Art and Design), or for the education of the public through large cultural institutions (such as the National Gallery of Ireland and the National Museum of Ireland). What were the differences between the plaster casts used by art students, and those viewed by members of the public? How were they treated?

The paper will investigate why certain sculptures reoccur in various collections, and whether the content of a collection influenced its fate as plaster casts began to fade from popularity in the mid-twentieth century. For example, were plaster casts of classical sculpture more vulnerable to destruction, while copies of Irish objects remained untouched? Why did the plaster casts of the high crosses of Ireland capture the Irish imagination, and why were they used to project an image of ‘Irishness’ around the world?

Using a biographical approach, the presentation will consider not just the original ‘lives’ of the plaster casts (in the time they were created), but their ‘afterlives’ in a world that no longer valued reproductions in the same way as when they were first made. It will consider the outright destruction of at least one Irish collection – that of the National College of Art and Design – but will also ask whether object neglect of plaster casts should be considered as destruction in its own right.

The paper will conclude with a look at the status of any remaining collections today, and a hopeful look to the future for these important objects.

**Michael Ann Bevivino** is an archaeologist with a particular interest in the reproduction of cultural objects in Ireland. She has conducted extensive research on the institutional histories of these items, as well as investigating how digital technologies can be used to further our understanding of both original and replica objects.