

Constructing an understanding of the process of making sculpture from observing plaster models and final sculptures

Plaster artist models represent a crucial stage in the process of making sculpture and are a bridge between two different creative moments in the process: the first being the construction of a clay model, and the second the creation of a final sculpture in stone or metal. The plaster model captures the form, dimensions, and detail of the original clay model and is then used as a guide by the artist to create the final sculpture. During the sculpting process, the model and final sculpture are inextricably connected. However, once the sculpture is finished, the objects are usually separated and presented independently, often without any recognition of their significant bond. In fact, the presentation of the two objects can often be very different: a plaster model is frequently preserved in a specialised museum setting or a deposit; whereas a final sculpture generally is found in a museum exhibition or in an outdoor context (a park, city centre, or square).

Recent studies have begun to explore the wealth of information that it is possible to gather about the working methods of an artist from studying plaster artist models in detail. An ongoing project financed by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) focusing on the role of the model in the work of the Swiss sculptor Vincenzo Vela (1820-1891) has brought together specialists from the Museo Vincenzo Vela and the University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Southern Switzerland (SUPSI) to study these issues in detail. This paper will first explore what is possible to learn about an artist from independently studying a collection of plaster models through direct observation and non-invasive investigative techniques, and then highlight the additional significant information and insight that is gained from studying the same plaster models in comparison with their corresponding final sculptures. Through observations based on three case studies representing three periods of the sculptor's life, and final objects realized in different materials, considered in the context of background information from historical and archival sources, it is possible to appreciate how crucial it is to unite the often parallel histories of the model and final sculpture and recognize the importance of the relationship between the two objects in understanding the working methods of the artist.

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