

The Canova Casts represent some of the finest masterpieces from the Vatican Collection. They came in a very circumspect way to Cork: a student of the Royal Academy of London overheard how the Academy Council had been offered a number of marvellous casts by the Prince Regent, which the Council were unable to accept due to lack of space. Saying nothing, the student called upon Lord Listowel, (Viscount Ennismore) who was himself a friend of the Prince Regent and one of the foremost patrons of the arts in the South of Ireland. The casts were obtained by Lord Listowel and with great haste were on the seas, in one of his Royal Highnesses' ships, to Cork. It must have been quite a spectacle on the quayside. The casts had originated in Rome, where they had been made under the supervision of the great Italian sculptor Antonio Canova. They were taken from works in the Vatican Collection and were chosen from the classical masterpieces, included also were casts from sculptures by Canova himself. Originally, the casts had been made on the orders of Pope Pius VII, to be presented to the Prince Regent of England (later King George IV) in gratitude for his help in the return of treasures looted by Napoleon. It seems the Prince Regent was not quite overjoyed on receiving a gift of over one hundred large sculpture casts and for quite a while they languished at the London Custom House. Later, the Prince Regent housed them in a large tent at his residence in Carlton Gardens, but it was not until they came to Cork that they found a home.

The Cork Society of Arts, the president of which was none other than Lord Listowel, set about adapting the old Apollo Theatre on Patrick Street into an exhibition space for the sculptures. Of the casts on display, twenty were whole figures, these included the Laocoon group, a Venus by Canova, and a figure by Michelangelo. There were ninety-one busts, nine bas-reliefs and seventy-eight fragments of antique statues. The stage of the theatre was screened off with a painted scene of a Greek temple, and the statues were arranged all around for the grand opening. Although there were reports of the public being alarmed at the sight of this display of classical mastery, mostly by their lack of clothing, the displaying of the casts in Cork was greeted with delight. It was declared that culture might now develop amongst the working class so that they might spend their money on art instead of on the demon drink. It was also perceived that students of art would now be able to study the human figure by studying the casts rather than having to travel to Dublin or worse still, abroad, to have their scruples tested by drawing from live models. Above all, the arrival of the casts was the catalyst needed for the creation of a school of art in the city.

Mr. Chalmers, Professor of Drawing and Painting, became the first headmaster of the Cork School of Art in 1819, with students such as Samuel Forde, Daniel Maclise, and John Hogan drawing and modelling from these casts. The artist Daniel Maclise, who was not yet a teenager when the casts arrived, described in his journal his amazement and delight on seeing them. He recalled how for years he studied the perfect forms of the figures. The funding for the school became an issue and the school remained in the improvised theatre for the next ten years. The Society of Arts fell on hard times and there was a real danger that the casts would be auctioned off to pay the society's debts. Happily, the Royal Cork Institution took them over and after a period of time in storage in 1830 they were moved to the Old Custom House. The Custom House was to become the School of Art and is today part of the Crawford Art Gallery. The significance of the casts to the school was huge as students were now afforded the same style of education as was common throughout Europe. In European schools the students studied anatomy from skeletons and models of the figure, they studied and copied from prints of the Old masters and they used casts of classical sculpture to study the human form for both painting and sculpture. The popularity of Neo-Classicism in the early nineteenth century meant the "Cork School of Casts" as it was called, was ideally equipped. Unfortunately over the years many of the original casts have been lost or destroyed, the Crawford Art Gallery is delighted to hold the finest of those preserved.