The Flaxman Collection at UCL contains the largest single group of works by Flaxman and includes plaster models, drawings and prints. It is a unique archive, offering insight into the Flaxman’s working methods and the development of individual monuments.

When Flaxman died in 1826 (the year UCL was founded) he bequeathed his estate to his sister-in-law Maria Denman. She planned to present Flaxman’s studio collection to an institution that could preserve it for the benefit of the public. When Henry Crabb Robinson – a retired barrister, early shareholder in the University of London and a friend of Flaxman (and many other notable English or German artists or writers of the day, including William Blake, Goethe, Schiller, Hegel, Wordsworth, and Coleridge) – became a member of the College Council in February 1835, he suggested that the Flaxman Collection should come to the University. Despite a suggestion in April that the works should be presented to the National Gallery, Denman made her first visit to UCL that summer.

Little happened to secure the gift for over a decade until Denman’s brother’s bankruptcy put the studio collection of plaster models at risk. On May 25th 1847, Denman contacted Crabb Robinson in great distress that Flaxman’s work would be sold to pay her brother’s creditors. At the bankruptcy case on June 5th, Crabb Robinson stepped in and made the necessary payments to retrieve the works.

These were brought to University College in June. In November, once legal ownership of the works had been resolved, University College proposed to Denman that the University should keep the sculptures. She accepted with enthusiasm. Crabb Robinson established a committee to raise funds to conserve and display the sculptures. When the Flaxman Gallery opened to the public in November 1851, 39 of Flaxman’s plaster models were set into the walls under UCL’s dome with the full-scale model for St. Michael Overcoming Satan in the centre. One of the first visitors was Prince Albert, who headed the list of subscribers to the Flaxman Gallery Fund.
Despite losing more than one hundred models to bombings in WWII, UCL still holds the largest collection of Flaxman’s models. This puts the Flaxman Gallery in the same league as other collections of plaster casts by individual artists such as Canova’s at Possagno and the Gipsoteca Bartolini in the Galleria dell’Academia in Florence. Despite later changes, the Gallery still presents an authentic Victorian ensemble, designed by some of the most eminent artists and architects of the time.

Read more about the Flaxman Gallery here.