

All Hail, Athena Lemnia!



R. Tripp Evans
President, Board of Directors

In August the Athenæum welcomed a distinguished guest for an extended stay: a nearly seven-foot-tall plaster cast of the Athena Lemnia, newly installed on the Main Level.

This impressive work comes to us on long-term loan from Wheaton College, where I have taught art history since 1997, and whose students last spring undertook a full catalogue of the library's art collection. Under my direction and that of Kate Wodehouse, Director of Collections & Library Services, students examined the collection both in visual terms – considering the objects' intrinsic merit and their impact on the library's physical spaces – and also as exemplars of our historical mission. Our new Athena Lemnia powerfully contributes to the library in both respects. Not only does it represent an important work in its own right, commanding attention among the library's former all-boys' club of portrait busts, but it also embodies a range of allusions that speak to our past and present.

It is remarkable that the Athenæum contained no representation of its patron deity until 2008, when Board member David Nishimura donated the now familiar Pallas of Velletri over the Circulation Desk.

Unlike the Pallas of Velletri, the Athena Lemnia does not wear her familiar Corinthian battle helmet. Rather, we know from contemporary sources, she originally held a helmet in her outstretched right hand and an impressive spear in her right (see following page). Her costume consists of a peplos – a single column of fabric, gathered at the waist – overlaid with Athena's characteristic aegis, a defensive garment featuring reptilian scales and the image of Medusa's severed head.

The statue's name derives from the Greek island of Lemnos, located northeast of Athens near present-day Turkey. Between 450–440 BCE, the sculptor Phidias created a bronze image of Athena for the Acropolis, dedicated to Lemnos's Athenian population. Along with his colossal chryselephantine (i.e. gold and ivory encrusted) Athena Parthenos, created for the Parthenon's inner sanctuary, the Athena Lemnia constituted one of the Acropolis's more significant monuments.¹ Like the Athena Parthenos,

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the statue was eventually dismantled for the value of its material and is today known only through fragmentary visual and literary evidence.

The Athena Lemnia now displayed in Germany's Dresden State Art Collection is in fact a pastiche of genuine antique works assembled by the archaeologist Albert Furtwängler (1853-1907). From an ancient gem he believed to depict the original Athena Lemnia, Furtwängler became convinced that the museum's Dresden Athena — a headless ancient figure acquired in the eighteenth century — was a Roman copy of the lost bronze.² The work's missing portion, he claimed, was the celebrated Palagi Head from the Museo Civico in Bologna, Italy; traditionally identified with Athena, this bust, too, was believed to be a Roman copy of a lost Greek original. When Furtwängler fastened a modern copy of the Bologna head onto the Dresden torso in 1891, the present-day Athena Lemnia was born.

Modern scholars are skeptical about Furtwängler's reconstruction. Aside from the patchy historical evidence regarding the work's original appearance, the Palagi Head is physically a poor fit on the Dresden Athena. Moreover, the head may not even depict Athena. In the 1980s, archaeologist Kim Hartswick convincingly argued that the Palagi Head is an original Roman work from the Hadrianic period (117-138 CE) and quite possibly a representation of Emperor Hadrian's lover, Antinous, whose image became ubiquitous after his deification in 130 CE.³ Far from detracting from the value of Furtwängler's creation, its composite nature only deepens its interest: it is at once Greek and Roman, ancient and Victorian, German and Italian, even female and male. The figure is, in some respects, a library unto itself.

The cast version of Furtwängler's Athena Lemnia made its first American appearance in the 1905 catalogue of the Boston casting firm, P.P. Caproni and Brother.⁴ Brothers Pietro (1862-1928) and Emilio (1869-1952), immigrants to Boston from Barga, Italy, established their casting business in 1892 and by the turn of the century supplied art schools, private collections, and libraries around the country. Wheaton purchased its Athena Lemnia from the firm in 1913 for \$75 — a significant investment for the day. The cast joined others collected by the college from the 1870s onwards, purchased for the use of its Art Department and exclusively representing, at




this former women's school, the great female figures of antiquity.

Before the widespread use of commercial photography, casts such as these were valued more for their educational role than as works of art in their own right – yet by the mid-twentieth century, these once critically important models had fallen out of fashion, often consigned to moldy basements or landfills. Wheaton's Athena Lemnia thankfully avoided such a fate. By the 1990s the statue had migrated to the college's Slide Library (a facility soon to become obsolete, in turn) where it was regularly festooned with feather boas, Mardi Gras beads, makeup, toenail polish, and a succession of seasonal hats. During this period the cast also came in for some rough, if accidental, treatment – resulting in damage to its peplos, a neckline fracture, and the loss of the figure's already vestigial left arm. Moved into gallery storage for protection in 2014, the Athena Lemnia remained safe from further harm but only rarely seen.

Today there is a new appreciation for these plaster casts, which are now as highly prized for their craftsmanship as for their storied past (the destruction of so many casts has also contributed to their rarity). The Boston Athenæum, for example – once one of the Caproni brothers' most important clients – has in recent years begun to painstakingly restore its cast collection. For its part, Wheaton, too, is now dedicated to preserving these works. This past summer the Athena Lemnia underwent a full restoration at the Giust Gallery in Woburn, Massachusetts, where restorers were able to recreate the statue's losses using the work's original Caproni mold. Acquired by the studio in the early 1990s, these molds are once again in full production.

Freshly returned to her 1913 glory, the Athena Lemnia will receive an official Athenæum welcome sometime this fall.

Until then, please stop by and pay her your homage. (No nail polish, please). 

¹ Olga Palagia, "In Defense of Furtwängler's Athena Lemnia," *American Journal of Archeology*, Vol. 91, No. 1 (January 1987), p.81.

² Kim J. Hartwick, "The Athena Lemnia Reconsidered," *American Journal of Archaeology*, Vol. 87, No. 3 (July 1983), p.336.

³ Hartwick, p.341.

⁴ Paige Brnger, "Lemnian Athena: The Journey of a Plaster Cast," 2015.

DUST REMOVED AND MYSTERIES SOLVED

Plaster Busts Identified – For decades, two unidentified plaster busts sat atop the bookshelves in the Art Room. Dirty and stained, these long forgotten sculptures were pushed into a dark corner until examined by Tripp and his Wheaton College students in the Cataloging Curiosities project this past spring. Recently restored at the Guist Galleries (along with Athena and our bust of Charles Darwin), the busts are currently displayed near Athena at the main entrance of the library. They have been identified as the missing James Phalen busts (their brothers top the mezzanine level), named in our archival records as Cicero and Napoleon. We have recently uncovered, however, that "Napoleon" is an impostor! Learn more about these busts and their identification on our Discover blog (provath.org/collections/discover).