

*After John Evan Thomas, Lord Byron. Plaster, Gift of James Phalen, 1840.*

It is no surprise that a bust of the celebrated poet, Lord George Gordon Byron [1788-1824] casts its watchful eye over the main hall of the Providence Athenaeum

Part of a set of ten portrait busts donated in 1840 by James Phalen,<sup>1</sup> an exchange and lottery manager in Providence,<sup>2</sup> *Lord Byron* is joined by representations of three other poets, John Milton, Sir Walter Scott and William Shakespeare.

Byron is depicted with all of the characteristics of the Romantic Movement he was so influential in. His expression and far off gaze is pensive yet sensitive, suggesting an acute awareness of his emotions. Known for being especially handsome, Byron is shown here as a young man with a beautiful face and curly locks of hair that gently fall in his face. The bust depicts Byron not in contemporary dress but in a classical toga, likening him to an ancient Greek or Roman poet. Given the nineteenth-century mania for all things neoclassical, bust portraiture was incredibly popular. Busts of distinguished political, ideological, and literary heroes, modeled after the ancient style, were often acquired by institutions like the Athenaeum to demonstrate their prestige and the links that presumably bound them to the Greco-Roman past.<sup>3</sup>

The original work, by John Evan Thomas [Welsh, 1810-1873], a pupil of Chantrey [see Shakespeare bust], is today in a private collection.

Lord Byron, born in London, was both a famous Romantic poet and, by dint of the title he inherited from his uncle, a member of the House of Lords. He attended Cambridge University and, after graduating, toured the Mediterranean where he was inspired to write the first two cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. Published in 1812, the work was a wild success. Despite his literary accomplishments, Byron's life was plagued with scandal. He had an illegitimate son with his half sister, divorced his wife, and had numerous affairs with both men and women; according to his onetime lover, Lady Caroline Lamb, he was "mad, bad, and dangerous to know."<sup>4</sup> In 1816 disgrace and debt led Byron to leave England, never to return. He spent time in Geneva, Switzerland, and later Italy, where he wrote another famous work, *Don Juan* (1819-1824).<sup>5</sup> Byron donated funds to the Greek War of Independence, a war that took his life in 1824.<sup>6</sup>

Unlike the other Phalen busts (with the exception of Sir Walter Scott [1771-1832]), this one would have been created not long after the subject's death; Byron died only 16 years before the bust was donated. A fairly contemporary figure, he would have been in the recent memory of Athenaeum goers.

Byron left a tremendous impact on Romantic writers such as Aleksandr Pushkin, painters like Eugène Delacroix, and composer Pyotr Tchaikovsky (whose "Manfred Symphony" was partly inspired by Byron).<sup>7</sup> Byron was known for his dynamic ability to write in many styles and genres, but was especially skilled at writing satire and verse narrative.<sup>8</sup> His fierce personality even inspired a signature character, the

Byronic hero, which would come to influence future Romantic poets.<sup>9</sup> This character was haunted by guilt and despair but could also be tender.<sup>10</sup>

Byron's significance as a poet enables his bust to serve as a Romantic emblem in the Athenaeum, an institution that holds many of his works in its rare book collection, including *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. Byron's legacy is equivalent to that of his countrymen Milton, Scott, and Shakespeare. Together, represented in busts at the Athenaeum, they provide inspiration to visitors enjoying all that literature has to offer. EW

I still need dimensions for the object. I was unable to identify the original bust that this came from.

### Bibliography

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<sup>1</sup> *Report Made to the Providence Athenaeum at the Fifth Annual Meeting* (Providence, Rhode Island: Providence Athenaeum, 1840), p.8.

<sup>2</sup> Providence City Directory, 1840.

<sup>3</sup> Nicholas Penny, "Bust," *Oxford Art Online*, 16 February 2015, accessed 10 February 2016, [http://0www.oxfordartonline.com.helin.uri.edu/subscriber/article/grove/art/T012680?q=busts&search=quick&pos=1&\\_start=1#firsthit](http://0www.oxfordartonline.com.helin.uri.edu/subscriber/article/grove/art/T012680?q=busts&search=quick&pos=1&_start=1#firsthit).

<sup>4</sup> Castle, Terry, "Mad, Bad and Dangerous to Know," *The New York Times*, 13 April 1997, accessed 22 March 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/books/97/04/13/reviews/970413.13castlet.html>

<sup>5</sup> "Lord Byron (1788-1824)," *bbc.co.uk*, 2014, accessed 10 February 2016, [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic\\_figures/byron\\_lord.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/byron_lord.shtml).

<sup>6</sup> "Lord Byron (George Gordon) 1788-1824," *Poetry Foundation*, accessed 8 February 2016, <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/lord-byron>.

<sup>7</sup> *Id*

<sup>8</sup> *Id*

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<sup>9</sup> "George Gordon Byron," *poets.org*, accessed 8 February 2016, <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poet/george-gordon-byron>.

<sup>10</sup> "Lord Byron, (1788-1824)" *Poetry Foundation*.