

Demosthenes. Plaster. Donated by James Phalen, 1840.

Located high atop a second-story bookcase, this bust of the Athenian orator and statesman Demosthenes [384-322 BC] is one of eighteen busts that circle the main reading room in the Athenaeum. Ten of the busts, including this one, were donated by James Phalen in 1840; other busts donated by Phalen include *Cicero*, *Homer*, and *Socrates*. Phalen, a Providence resident, was a managing contractor for US lotteries.[1] In 1838, Phalen's Exchange and Lottery Office was located in 6 Mallet's Buildings on 151 North Main St.[2]

Demosthenes is positioned between two of the more contemporary figures from the Phalen gift, the busts of William Shakespeare and George Washington. This placement is justified in a piece on Demosthenes in the Athenaeum's Spring 2016 literary publication the *Universal Penman*:

He was a revered figure to the earliest benefactors of the Athenaeum, and wisely, they placed him between Washington and Shakespeare: a self-made citizen who was one-half statesman, and one-half rhetorical genius.[3]

Although the original bust which this plaster copy is derived from is unidentified, the bust possesses certain features which are shared in Demosthenes' representations. The receding hairline, furrowed brow, and beard are all indicative of Demosthenes' features. This bust of *Demosthenes* is physically distinctive from other busts depicting the great orator. The nose is narrow and pointed down, the forehead is wrinkled with worry lines and the brow is furrowed. The skin in the cheeks sag and the hairline is receding. The hair is voluptuously carved and the full mustache and beard have intricate detail. With chest bared, Demosthenes is depicted in Classical heroic nudity, while his aged face suggests an air of wisdom and authority.

This bust was carved in Hellenistic Greek style which is characterized by intense facial expressions, deep and intricate carving, and dramatic movement.[4] The intricate carving in the beard and hair as well as the lines in the face create dramatic shadows in the sculpture. Opposed to the calm, elegant expressions of 5th century Classical sculpture, Hellenistic sculpture flourished during Demosthenes' lifetime.

A contemporary of Plato and Aristotle, Demosthenes is known for rousing Athens to fight against Philip of Macedon and his son Alexander the Great.[5] Though the son of a wealthy swordmaker, he was eventually left destitute when his father passed away, for his guardians squandered the estate and left very little when he came of age.[6] Demosthenes did not have the physical stamina to receive a Greek gymnastics education, so he built an underground study where he trained himself to be an orator.[7]

Suffering from a speech defect which hindered his speaking, he overcame this by filling his mouth with pebbles and speaking around them.[8] After he sued his guardian, Aphobus, several people were impressed by his great oratory skills and powerful clients hired him to write their speeches.[9] In 354 BCE, he gave his famous speech “On the Navy Boards” before the Athenian Assembly, a crowd of 6,000 men.[10] His first great speech, he succeeded in convincing the Athenians to expand their navy in order to win the fight against the Persians.[11]

A full-figure plaster cast of Demosthenes stands in the Boston Athenaeum. It is cast from the marble sculpture in the Vatican, which is a copy of an ancient Greek bronze sculpture created by Polyeyktos.[12] The fact that both such prestigious intellectual institutions have representations of Demosthenes says a lot about his importance in Classical scholarship. Demosthenes’ love for democracy is highly relevant in the Athenaeum and his reputation as a prominent statesman and orator serves as a model of excellence for Athenaeum patrons. A visual signifier of political excellence and a master of his craft, his presence within the Athenaeum imparted a sense of values and character for 19th century young men. MDP

Notes:

[1] Edward Walford, John Charles Cox, George Latimer Apperson, *The Antiquary, Volume 44* (Elliot Stock, 1908), p. 304.

[2] “U.S. City Directories, 1822-1995”, *Ancestry*, ancestry.com.

[3] Matt Burriesci, “Who Is This Guy?”, *Universal Penman*, (Providence Athenaeum: Spring 2016), p. 12.

[4] “Greek Art: The Hellenistic Period”, *Greek Landscapes*, greeklandscapes.com.

[5] “Demosthenes (384-322 B.C.)”, *The Latin Library*, thelatinlibrary.com.

[6] *Id.*

[7] *Id.*

[8] *Id.*

[9] *Id.*

[10] *Id.*

[11] Matt Burriesci, “Who Is This Guy?”, p. 11.

[12] “Demosthenes and Sophocles”, *Boston Athenaeum*, bostonathenaeum.org.