

Homer (before 1840). Plaster, Gift of James Phalen, 1840.

This undated portrait bust of the Greek philosopher Homer [b. ca. 850 BCE] bears a resemblance with the rare pseudo-portrait of Homer of late Hellenistic date in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.¹ Similar to sculpting a well-known portrait bust, plaster casts of famous works were used to transmit the artistic and cultural values of Western civilization to generations in America for almost two hundred years.²

The work was a gift from James Phalen, who donated ten well-executed busts of ancient and modern literary, philosophical, and political icons soon after the Athenaeum's founding (indeed, these were among the earliest works acquired by the library). Mr. James Phalen was a managing contractor for lotteries in the United States,³ with an exchange and lottery office located at in Mallett's Building on North Main Street.⁴

The Athenaeum's collection of busts is displayed along the bookshelves on the first floor and atop the alcoves around the main hall of the library. This bust of Homer rests atop the first bookshelf at the right near the main entrance, a location that lends it a certain prominence over the others. The installation of the busts accentuates the library's vertical space, while also adding visual interest at each level of the library. Displaying these testaments to intellectual achievement along the main hall of the Athenaeum has created an inspiring and encouraging environment for its readers since Phalen's day.

The figure of Homer is a mystery. Very little is known about the life of the greatest Greek poet of classical antiquity, yet his epic poems *The Iliad* and the *Odyssey* continue to have enormous influence on Western culture. These works concern the Trojan War and its aftermath, providing an important insight into early Greek society. All portraits of Homer are pure invention, based on late Hellenistic biographies of the poet –

¹ Homer Bust, Late 1st century B.C. or 1st century A.D. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. (www.mfa.org)

² McNutt, James K.. 1990. "Plaster Casts After Antique Sculpture: Their Role in the Elevation of Public Taste and in American Art Instruction". *Studies in Art Education* 31 (3). National Art Education Association: 158–67. doi:10.2307/1320763. P158.

³ *The Antiquary*. Volume 44. 1908.

⁴ *Providence Directory*. Published by H. H. Brown. 1838-1839.

virtually all of which derived entirely from his poems, despite the fact that Homer provides no personal information about himself or his family in his works.⁵ Many scholars believe, however, that Homer's character Demodokos –a blind traveling singer from *The Odyssey* –may be a self-portrait of the poet.⁶

In the Athenaean bust, Homer is mostly bald with a headband that holds back thick, curly hair at the base of his head. Typically, Hellenistic depictions of classical philosophers and thinkers, like the original upon which this work is based, depict these men as bearded, older men.⁷ Hellenistic style reflects veristic depiction of the subject, and always comes out with more dramatic and representational expressions.⁸ Although Homer clearly progressed through youth and middle age, his baldness and serious facial expression in this instance symbolize his great wisdom and authoritativeness.
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⁵ Lefkowitz, Mary R. *The Lives of The Greek Poets*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012.

⁶ Ibid, p29.

⁷ Scholten, Frist. 2011. "Bald or Headband?" *The Rijksmuseum Bulletin* 59 (2): 183–85.

⁸ Burn, Lucilla. *Hellenistic Art: From Alexander the Great to Augustus*. Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2004. P53.