

George Washington. Plaster, H.25 in (63.5 cm). Gift of James Phalen, 1840.

This portrait bust of George Washington, one of ten plaster busts that Providence resident James Phalen donated to the Atheneum in 1840, places the nation's first president amongst a pantheon of literary and political heroes from antiquity to the nineteenth century.

Of the many great historical figures represented in the Phalen Collection, it is worth noting that Washington is the lone American—a distinction that was no doubt intentional. Following the American Revolution, the United States ambitiously embraced the civic ideals and virtues of antiquity, injecting borrowed sophistication from Europe with hints of originality and native symbolism.¹ Washington, the figure who led the nation towards a thriving republic, had become by 1840 a celebrated American icon worthy of comparison with Europe and the ancient world's most illustrious cultural figures. Victorious on the battlefield and first President of the United States, Washington assumed his place as the nation's first secular saint.

From a stylistic standpoint, the Phalen bust of Washington perfectly embodies American visions of neoclassicism in this era, transforming him into a symbol of America's burgeoning national identity. Apparently cast from the celebrated full-length portrait of Washington by Jean Antoine Houdon [French, 1774-1828], the president wears the toga of a Roman senator, embodying a timeless quality and referencing his patriotism by way of a classical example. Representing Revolutionary figures in classical dress was a commonplace phenomenon in the nineteenth century, an era that frequently summoned the ancient world as a metaphor for native values (William Strickland's design of the Athenaeum itself is another example of this practice).²

The American republic forged after the Revolution was preoccupied establishing the foundations of government and economy, leaving little time to commission monuments and sculptures – thus, ironically, sculptural depictions of Washington in America remained relatively modest in his own lifetime. The first major commission to portray Washington went to Houdon, who at the behest of Thomas Jefferson and accompanied by Benjamin Franklin, came to America in 1785 to model a life-sized statue of George Washington. Executed in Houdon's Paris studio, it was finally installed in the Rotunda of the Virginia State Capital in 1796. To augment the modest income from his undertaking, Houdon produced numerous busts of Washington – from which copious casts, like the Athenaeum's bust, were produced.³

The bust's donor was, in his own modest way, a generous civic figure, who felt a responsibility to support the arts and education of his community. A lifelong Providence resident, Phalen was a managing contractor for lotteries in the United States, an effective system that raised funds to support public works projects and metropolitan improvements, granting sums for the erection of municipal buildings and needed repairs on public roadways. Between 1839 through 1842, Phalen managed three lottery tickets for the School Fund Lotteries, advocating for public schools and education. His lottery office was located at 6 Mallett's Building, 151 North Main Street.⁴

¹ John K. Howat, John Wilmerding, Natalie Spassky, et al, *19th Century America: Paintings and Sculpture* (The Metropolitan Museum of Art: New York Graphic Society LTD), ix.

² Wendy A Cooper, *Classical Taste in America: 1800-1840* (Abbeville Press Publishers, New York, 1993), 19.

³ H. Nicholas B. Clark, "An Icon Preserved: Continuity in the Sculptural Images of Washington," in *George Washington: American Symbol*, ed. Barbara J. Mitnick (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1999), 42.

⁴ H. H. Brown, *Providence City Directory of 1838-1839*.

Phalen's contribution to the library does not simply reflect a personal choice: Washington's inclusion in antiquity speaks to America's desire to express its burgeoning identity through palpable sculpture, allowing an abstract concept, still new and fluid, to come to life.