

## **Bust of Francesco Petrarch, Plaster, Gift of James Phalen**

Unknown artist, *Bust of Francesco Petrarch* (unknown date). Plaster. Bequest of James Phalen, 1840.

The off-white columnar bookshelves which line the mezzanine of the Athenaeum serve as pedestals for marble and plaster busts of famous writers, poets, philosophers, and historical figures. Each bust oversees the main lobby and its visitors, giving the main floor a certain level of historical context that informs patrons of the different types of scholarly materials that can be found at the Athenaeum.

Francesco Petrarch [1304-1374] was an Italian poet from Tuscany whose dedication to classical scholarship ties him directly to the mission of the Providence Athenaeum. His plaster bust resides at the Providence Athenaeum thanks to a generous, early gift from James Phalen.

Phalen, a former exchange and lottery manager in Providence[1] donated a series of plaster busts to the Athenaeum in 1840[2]. The “ten well-executed busts of illustrious personages ancient and modern”[3] represented political and scholarly figures as well as individuals that contributed to the fine arts such as poets, writers. The poet, Petrarch, fits well into the mix of busts of the other prominent historical figures, especially other poets and writers such as Homer, Lord Byron, Sir Walter Scott, and John Milton.

Petrarch’s plaster bust is placed high above the main floor atop the library alcoves of the Athenaeum where it is easily visible to all. His features are typical of reproductions of Early Modern figures, as is his clothing. His habit references his involvement with the Catholic church and his honorary laurel wreath Petrarch earned for being the poet laureate. The bust does not appear to be a replica of an earlier work and may have been created after one of his portraits, as in paintings of the poet, he is almost always depicted wearing similar clothing and a wreath.

After briefly studying law in Bologna, Petrarch abandoned his studies to pursue scholarship of the classics such as Cicero, Vergil, and the Latin Classics as well as theology. Petrarch worked under the Roman Catholic Church and Cardinal Colonna as a scholar and poet. Petrarch is known to have been one of the earliest Renaissance humanists and is widely regarded as the “Father of Humanism.” Humanism was a Renaissance movement that moved away from the scholarly traditions of the Middle Ages and began to look back on the thought processes of Greek and Roman scholars and philosophers. His poems were greatly influenced by classic Italian forms and discuss themes of love. A romantic poet, Petrarch wrote a great number of works that told stories of love and chastity in the scope of a larger political and theological landscape. A good example of this is Sonnet 102:

“If no love is, O God, what fele I so?  
And if love is, what thing and which is he?  
If love be good, from whennes cometh my woo?  
If it be wikke, a wonder thynketh me,

When every torment and adversite  
That cometh of hym, may to me savory thinke,  
For ay thurst I, the more that ich it drynke.  
And if that at myn owen lust I brenne,  
From whennes cometh my waillynge and my pleynte?  
If harm agree me, whereto pleyne I thenne?  
I noot, ne whi unwery that I feynte.  
O quike deth, O swete harm so queynte,  
How may of the in me swich quantite,  
But if that I consente that it be?  
And if that I consente, I wrongfully  
Compleyne, iwis. Thus possed to and fro,  
Al sterelees withinne a boot am I  
Amydde the see, betwixen wyndes two,  
That in contrarie stonden evere mo.  
Allas! what is this wondre maladie?  
For hete of cold, for cold of hete, I dye.”

Phalen’s generous gift to the Athenaeum speaks to his beliefs on the importance of art and scholarship. Tied to each bust is the ideas and values that each figure represented, in this case, Petrarch’s bust speaks to the importance of literature, specifically poetry, and to the beauty of writing.

[1] *Providence City Directory*, 1840.

[2] *Report Made to the Providence Athenaeum at the Fifth Annual Meeting* (Providence, Rhode Island: Providence Athenaeum, 1840), 8.

[3] Jane Lancaster, *Inquire Within: A Social History of the Providence Athenaeum since 1753* (Providence: The Providence Athenaeum, 2003), 64.