

(Unknown Artist) Bust of Sir Walter Scott (c. 1840) Gift of James Phalen, 1840.

This portrait bust of the renowned Scottish novelist, playwright, and poet, Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832) joined the Athenaeum's collection in 1840, along with nine other busts in a single gift from James Phalen. The Athenaeum's bust of Scott, along with the nine other Phalen busts, is a copy of the original Scott bust in a larger public collection.

A plaster reproduction of an 1828 marble bust by Sir Francis Chantrey [English, 1781-1841], a work owned by the Scottish National Portrait Gallery in Edinburgh, this portrait portrays Scott with a calm, wise expression, and wearing what is believed to be a Scottish lowland plaid¹ -- a fitting nationalist touch, and one that simultaneously recalls the era's penchant for portraying contemporary figures in the draped togas of classical past. Chantrey approached Sir Scott himself with the request for him to sit for a bust because of his deep admiration for his work.² His head is turned to left, away from the viewer. While he is not wearing a toga, the heavy drapery he is adorned in reminds the viewer of classical Roman portraiture. This recollection of Roman portraiture can be read as a way to link Scott to the great literary icons of the past.

At the age of eighteen months Scott became ill with polio, which left his right leg lame. This disability greatly affected his childhood, isolating him from his siblings and peers, and drawing him closely to his mother, Anne Rutherford Scott. This bond with his mother became important to his later career as a novelist, for his mother was said to have "had a mind for tales and proverbs"³

By the 1820s Scott was arguably the most famous writer in Scotland, and also one of its leading intellectuals. Graduating from Edinburgh University at the tender age of seventeen, he had followed in his father's footsteps and become a lawyer. At twenty-five he started to write, achieving his first success in 1796, with *The Chase, and William and Helen*⁴, a set of translated German ballads.

Intensely proud of its native son, the city of Edinburgh erected the colossal Scott Memorial in 1844 – the world's largest monument to a writer – with a central portrait figure by Sir John Steell [Scottish, 1804-1891].⁵ Steell's depiction of Scott in his memorial statue is eerily similar to the bust of Scott at the Athenaeum. Scott's facial features are accurately represented, he is turning his head away from the

¹ "Sir Francis Chantrey's Bust of Sir Walter Scott (1820)." Sir Francis Chantrey's Bust of Sir Walter Scott (1820). Accessed March 08, 2016. <http://www.walterscott.lib.ed.ac.uk/portraits/paintings/chantrey.html>.

² Id.

³ Buchan, John. *Sir Walter Scott*. New York: Coward-McCann, 1932.

⁴ Britannica. "Sir Walter Scott, 1st Baronet." Last modified April 6, 2015. <http://www.britannica.com/biography/Sir-Walter-Scott-1st-Baronet>

⁵ "Sir Walter Scott." Wikipedia. Accessed March 09, 2016.

viewer and to the left, and he is draped in Scottish Lowland plaid. The statue itself is within a larger 200-foot tower, featuring 93 people, two dogs, and a pig⁶. The context between the Chantrey bust and the Monument Tower is entirely different, but the intention is the same: to honor the literary legend Sir Walter Scott and recognize the inspiration he served as for others.

Considered alongside the other busts from the Phalen gift, Scott is joined by three other poets from the British Isles – Lord Byron, William Shakespeare, and John Milton. Having this bust of Sir Walter Scott at the Athenaeum adds to the depth of literary icons that the Athenaeum identifies with and gains inspiration from. Having the bust of Scott and his literary peers in the library contributes to a communal motivation of the viewer to pursue knowledge through books.

Notes:

"Sir Francis Chantrey's Bust of Sir Walter Scott (1820)." Sir Francis Chantrey's Bust of Sir Walter Scott (1820). Accessed March 08, 2016.
<http://www.walterscott.lib.ed.ac.uk/portraits/paintings/chantrey.html>.

Buchan, John. *Sir Walter Scott*. New York: Coward-McCann, 1932.

"Sir Walter Scott." Wikipedia. Accessed March 09, 2016.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walter_Scott#Memorials_and_commemoration.

"The Antiquary." Google Books. Accessed March 09, 2016.
<https://books.google.com/books?id=4rNCAQAAMAAJ>.

- I asked Kate if the Athenaeum had any books by Scott and if he were popular in the 1840s still but I never heard back.

⁶ Wikipedia. "Scott Monument." Last modified March 6, 2016.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scott_Monument