

Bust of Socrates, Plaster, Gift of James Phalen

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

The busts that sit atop the library alcoves of the Athenaeum speak to the importance of history and scholarship within the library. The bust of Socrates exemplifies the type of thinking that is promoted within the institution through its expansive collection of philosophical texts and the nature of the discussions that take place during the weekly salons.

The Greek philosopher Socrates[470 BCE-399 BCE], widely considered to be the father of Western philosophy and was followed by Plato, his student, who would go on to teach Aristotle, who would then tutor Alexander the Great. Due to that sequence and Alexander the Great's global conquests, the philosophical work of Socrates was able to reach the far corners of the Ancient world, making him the most widely followed philosopher of the time.

James Phalen donated this bust, along with least ten others in 1840[1]. The busts represented an array of different scholars, poets, philosophers, and political figures, and is particularly rich in figures from the ancient world – including Homer, Demosthenes, and Cicero. Among these, Socrates stands apart for being the first of all the figures represented to question authority for the sake of the greater good and his works would have been studied by many of the other figures represented (save Homer, whose life far predated that of Socrates). As a group, the busts represent the various traditions of classical as well as more contemporary scholarship and coincide with the Athenaeum's mission to “encourage a love of reading and learning to all.”

The white plaster bust of Socrates fits well among the others lining the mezzanine of the Athenaeum. The bust features well-defined curls on both his head and face as well as heavy, sunken-in eyes. The lines on his forehead and eyes lead the viewer to believe Socrates lived a life full of contemplation, laughter, and worry. The detail of the bust's head is contrasted with the starkness of his naked torso, which only accentuates his telling features.

His round, bearded face with its receding hairline and bulbous nose is easily identifiable to those well-acquainted with the study of classical history and the arts. That being said, it is important to question the canonical image of Socrates that has become so familiar to contemporary audiences throughout centuries. It is hard to imagine that the Socrates we see depicted in sculpture and painting would be recognizably accurate to those who actually knew him. It is known, however, that representations of Socrates are largely based on the descriptions of Plato and Xenophon, two individuals who spent significant periods of time with the famed philosopher. [2]

The busts donated by Phalen fit well into the nineteenth-century trend of purchasing and displaying works of art that call back to Classical Antiquity. The Athenaeum was one of many private institutions which chose to use Classical works, such as marble copies and plaster casts, as “a means of improving public taste.”[3] The bust of Socrates exemplifies

this concept as it references his work as well as the scholarship that followed, encouraging Athenaeum visitors on their pursuit of knowledge and rational thought.

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

[2] Walters, H. B.. 1925. "A Portrait-statuettes of Socrates". *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 45. The Society for the Promotion of Hellenic Studies: 258.

[3] Cooper, Wendy A., *Classical Taste in America: 1800-1840*. (The Baltimore Museum of Art Abbeville Press Publishers; 1993) 85.