

George O. Annable, *The Honorable John Pitman* (c.1853). Marble, H.28in. Gift of the Friends of the Athenaeum, 1853.

This bust was created in honor of the prominent Rhode Island social and political figurehead, Judge John Pitman (1785-1864). Judge Pitman secured the future of the Athenaeum, and inflated the growing importance of the arts in Providence, Rhode Island.

A native of Providence, Rhode Island, Pitman was not only the Athenaeum's first Board President, starting in 1836, but also its longest-serving one; he would not relinquish the position until 1856. Well before his presidency until well after leaving the Board, he also served as a United States District Court Judge for the District of Rhode Island, in Providence. Appointed by President James Madison in 1824, he remained on the bench until his death in 1864.

Pitman was known throughout Providence as an important patron of the arts. While embracing the responsibility of leading the Athenaeum to further development, he also helped found the Rhode Island Art association from his office at the Athenaeum. In collecting works of interest and value to the Athenaeum, Pitman demanded that they collect "all works which may illustrate the truths and exhibit the progress of science and the classics of literature."¹ He also stated that the Athenaeum was "no place for the exaggerated descriptions, the vicious sentiments and the varnished impurities of modern fiction"² Eventually Pitman's attitude towards novels changed and they were added to the collection. Pitman helped shape the Athenaeum's future in shaping its collection, and gaining members that helped keep the institution's doors open (by advertising the lower price of the Providence Athenaeum than the Boston Athenaeum.)

Pitman's rather grand portrait is the work of Providence sculptor George Oliver Annable [American, 1829-1887]. Annable studied under the Providence miniaturist Jane Catherine Chapin, but turned to sculpture early on in his career, specializing in miniature portrait cameos. Two years before undertaking the commission for this bust, Annable won an award from the Rhode Island Society for the Encouragement of Domestic Industry.

Although Annable typically worked in small scale, he occasionally – and quite deftly -- worked at life size seen here as well as in his *General Nathaniel Greene* (1855), also in the Athenaeum collection. Experience in creating cameo portraits – a genre that required him to capture the subtleties of his sitters' character in the most economical form possible – appears to have served him well in this portrait. As his Providence contemporary, artist John Nelson Arnold, said of Annable: "He had a wonderful talent for getting a likeness, having an accurate eye for form, and he

¹ Jane Lancaster, *Inquire Within: A Social History of the Providence Athenaeum Since 1753*, (Providence: The Providence Athenaeum, 2003) p. 60.

² Id.

easily seized the characteristic expression of his patrons.”³ Along with providing two portraits to the collection, he also contributed a Federal-era couch placed in the room where the salons are held, downstairs at the Athenaeum.

Annable decided to represent Judge John Pitman adorned in a Roman toga, with a wise expression on his face. This portrait is very similar to typical Roman portraits of political figures. Such Roman features include the blank eyes, the toga, and the fact that he is visually represented as an elderly man, indicating his intellect and the hard work he endured throughout his lifetime, thus the ideal Roman man. This specific representation of Pitman is ideal in visually emphasizing his importance to both Providence as a city, and the Athenaeum as an intellectual institution he so proudly lead into the future. His features are so well done and proportional that one cannot tell the artist was primarily a miniature cameo artist.

Commissioned by “a number of friends of the Athenaeum” in 1853 Pitman’s bust is extolled in the *Annual Report* for that year. Vice President of the Board, William J. Patten writes:

A new ornament to our library room will be noticed at the present meeting of the proprietors—a marble bust of the President of the Corporation. In this first work of the kind belonging to the Institution, it is pleasant to see so well embodied the features of one who has been from the foundation of the Athenaeum its honored head. This bust is by our young townsman George O. Annable, of whom it is but faint praise to say that he has thus far fully justified the strong confidence entertained of his genius for art.”⁴

³ Howard M. Chapin, "George Annable." 119-21. Vol. XXII. Rhode Island Historical Society, *Quarterly*, 1929, p.119. [Rhode Island Historical Society].

⁴ *Annual Report*, September 26, 1853, 21-22. [Providence Athenaeum Archives].

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Jane Lancaster, *Inquire Within: A Social History of the Providence Athenaeum Since 1753*, (Providence: The Providence Athenaeum, 2003) p. 60.

Chapin, Howard M. "George Annabale." In *Rhode Island Historical Society Collections*, 119-21. 4th ed. Vol. XXII. Quarterly. Providence, 1929.

Annual Report, September 26, 1853, 21-22. [Providence Athenaeum Archives].

- I couldn't find where he learned full scale sculpting from
- I didn't have time to go back to Providence since the last time I was there so I couldn't find any more information on Pitman's role at the athenaeum.