

PROVIDENCE ATHENAEUM – Wheaton College student essay, Column of Phocas, 2016.

Unknown artist, *Column of Phocas* (architectural model). Marble, H, 15.75” (40 cm), W, 15.75” (40 cm). Donated by Dr. Alexis Caswell in 1861.

Of the three architectural models of Roman ruins at the Athenaeum, the *Column of Phocas* is the monument comprised of a single column and is closest to its original condition. The column was monument to be erected in the Roman Forum and holds special significance for this reason. The column is shrunken significantly from its actual size which makes it easy for viewers to assess and analyze the structure. At the Athenaeum, the three architectural models speak to a fondness for the classical past and the popular neoclassical movement.

The fluted marble column of the corinthian order stands atop a wide platform with stairs leading up from all sides towards the base. The marble has yellowed with age and there is noticeable dust throughout the base. On the right side there are some minor spots and small chips and on the left side of the base there is a significant chip. The replica looks identical to the column that still stands in the Forum and was created by a talented sculptor, though the artist is unknown.

Phocas was the cruel and unforgiving emperor of the Byzantine Empire in which this monument was dedicated to. While the exact reason for the monument in his name is unknown, it is documented that Phocas donated the Pantheon to Pope Boniface IV, who turned it into a Catholic church, saving one of the most beautiful and important structures of antiquity. Phocas murdered his predecessor to usurp the throne in 602 CE and two years after the column was erected, he,

himself was overthrown and brutally killed.[1] At one point, a gilded statue of Phocas stood atop the column but was taken down along with all other monuments in his name.

The Athenaeum acquired the sculpture through a donation by Dr. Alexis Caswell (1799-1877), who served as the president of Brown from 1868-1872. Caswell was also a director of the Athenaeum for eight years and a vice president for eight more. Architecture was one of Caswell's greatest passions and was a primary reason for his presidency at Brown, as the faculty hoped that his term would inspire "correct architectural taste among us." [2] Upon donating the architectural models (of which the Temple of Vespasian is only one of three), Caswell spoke of the replicas and their place in the Athenaeum:

"Every visitor in Rome makes it almost his first business to hasten to the Forum, to see them in their grandeur and their desolation. When I was here during the last winter, as I gazed again and again upon them, it occurred to me that I could not render a better service to the Providence Athenaeum, than by placing accurate copies of these much admired remains of ancient art in its halls. I hoped, also, that they would interest and gratify the public, and would be especially welcomed by the lovers of art; and minister, in some degree, to the growth of a correct architectural taste among us." – Rev. Dr. Alexis Caswell (1799-1877)

This work, along with the two others purchased and donated by Caswell in 1861 made their way into the hearts and minds of the people in Providence. The reproduction of the architectural models fit well into the discourse of the new democracy being created by a young America. The Roman structures echo ideas of democracies past and were used stylistically to reinforce the budding ideologies of the United States.

- [1] Whitby, Michael. 1989. *Chronicon Paschale 284-628 AD*. Liverpool University Press.
- [2] Jane Lancaster, *Inquire Within: A Social History of the Providence Athenaeum since 1753* (Providence: The Providence Athenaeum, 2003), 125
- [3] *Twenty-Sixth Annual Report of the Board of Directors of the Providence Athenaeum to the Corporation*, submitted September 23, 1861. 14.