

PROVIDENCE ATHENAEUM – Wheaton College student essay, spring 2016.

Attributed to Henry Cheever Pratt, *John Russell Bartlett as a Young Man* (ca. 1830-1840). Oil on Canvas, 27” x 23”. Elisha Capron Mowry, 1964.

When one first views the *Portrait of John Russell Bartlett as a Young Man*, many things catch the eye of the individual. This captivating portrait focuses on a critical founding member of the Athenaeum as well as an essential figure to Rhode Island.

The importance of John Russell Bartlett [1803-1886] to the history of Rhode Island is nearly equivalent to George Washington’s integral role during the American Revolution; they are both vital historical figures. Much like George Washington was vital in fighting for and creating the new nation, Bartlett strove to help create and solidify the fledgling library. Bartlett was instrumental to the founding of the Athenaeum and as such deserves to be remembered in the way that this portrait shows; a bright young man full of promise and knowledge.

Bartlett was a founding member of the Athenaeum and continued to support and foster the organization until his death in the 1860s, “ He was active in all phases of the Athenaeum’s development, serving as an officer and as a member of many committees; writing numerous committee reports; purchasing and cataloguing book; raising funds for a new building; and so forth”.¹ Bartlett served as a bookkeeper for his Uncle in Canada before returning to Providence. In Providence he gained a position in the Bank of America and as the Athenaeum was coming into its early stages, Bartlett acquired funds from the bank president.² It is hard to imagine what would have become of the Athenaeum without the hard work and dedication of Bartlett.

When the viewer first sees *Portrait of John Russell Bartlett as a Young Man*, the eyes are drawn into the pleasant face and strong features of the young Bartlett. Bartlett’s face shows both the youth, beauty, and the determination of this native Rhode Islander. A fashionable figure, Bartlett wears the latest styles of the 1830s featuring somber colors and a high collar, both of which help speak to the duality of Bartlett’s expression. Bartlett’s captivating eyes portray both a determination and a hint of playfulness and charisma. This sense of charm is strengthened when the viewer’s gaze move towards his hairstyle, prominently featuring dark and wild locks. A Romantic mystique surrounds Bartlett, by the dreamy clouds of reds, purples, and pinks that encase the portrait. The idea behind this is to create an image that conveys the sitter’s inner essence, in this case showing the charm and ease of young Bartlett³. The viewer is put at ease with Bartlett

¹ John Russell Bartlett, and Jerry E. Mueller. *Autobiography of John Russell Bartlett, 1805-1886*. Providence, RI: John Carter Brown Library, 2006.

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² Jane Lancaster, *Inquire Within*, The Providence Athenaeum, 2003, 39

³ Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History Romanticism, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Accessed March 22, 2016 www.metmuseum.org

due to the celestial background and the pleasing aspects of his face that are caught on the canvas.

While the portrait was originally attributed to James Sullivan Lincoln [American 1811-1888], who painted the Athenaeum's later portrait of Bartlett, it is more likely that a close friend of Bartlett's (and local painter) Henry Cheever Pratt [American 1805-1880] is responsible for this work⁴. Pratt, part of an established New England family, was born in New Hampshire and later spent his married life in Massachusetts. This painting was originally thought to have been commissioned by Bartlett himself, when he was sent to map the border between the United States and Mexico between 1851 and 1853.⁵ Pratt accompanied Bartlett during this expedition and painted what is most likely the portrait that viewers in the Athenaeum admire. During Bartlett's time living in New York he came upon hard times, through his political connections with the Whig Party he was offered the position to be the Commissioner of the U.S.- Mexico Boundary Survey.⁶ Through his career Pratt painted more than one picture of Bartlett, though only one is owned by the Athenaeum today.⁷ The unknowns of this painting complete the mystique of Bartlett's figure, started by the background of the piece.

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⁴ Dawn Hall, *Drawing the Borderline: Artist-explorers of the U.S.-Mexico Boundary Survey*. Albuquerque, NM: Albuquerque Museum, 1996.

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⁵ *ibid*, p.29

⁶ *ibid*, 30-31

⁷ *ibid*, p.29