



THE BOSTON ATHENÆUM *News Release*

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For Immediate Release

EXHIBITION ABOUT BOSTON ATHENÆUM'S KEY ROLE IN FOUNDING MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON, OPENS FEBRUARY 13

(Boston, Massachusetts, January 23, 2013) On March 10, 1870, the trustees of the newly incorporated Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, met for the first time. Boston's first art museum had no building, no collection, and very little in the way of financial resources. Where would the museum be? How would it be organized and staffed? Who would pay the bills? What was its purpose? Who would it serve?

Organized by Hina Hirayama, the Boston Athenæum's associate curator of paintings & sculpture, the exhibition "Brilliant Beginnings: The Athenæum and the Museum in Boston" explores what happened next. The exhibition, on view at the Athenæum's Norma Jean Calderwood Gallery February 13 through August 3, 2013, celebrates the exceptionally close collaboration between the fledgling Museum of Fine Arts and the Boston Athenæum, which itself had collected and exhibited art since 1827.

With some 70 objects, including paintings, sculptures, watercolors, drawings, photographs, decorative arts, and documents, the show outlines how the Athenæum was a generous lender and friend, indulgent temporary landlord, mentor, and senior patron during critical years when the MFA's

very survival was sometimes in question. This historic partnership, Hirayama explains, was “exceptional in its intensity, intimacy, and informality.” It was also deeply important to both the success of the MFA and the development of American art museums. Yet its story has never fully been told before.

“Brilliant Beginnings” is presented in conjunction with the release in March of Hirayama’s new book, *With Éclat: The Boston Athenæum and the Origin of the Museum of Fine Arts*, Boston (University Press of New England, March 2013). Based on extensive new research, the book and the exhibition present the first complete chronicle of this pioneering collaboration in its historical context.

Art at the Boston Athenæum, 1827-1870



Enrico Meneghelli (1852- after 1912) *Picture Gallery of the Boston Athenæum*, 1876. Collection of the Boston Athenæum, Purchase, 1876.

Although the Boston Athenæum is now known mostly as a library, its founders hoped it would develop into an institution with a “general... collection in *every* branch of knowledge,” including a “Repository of Arts”

filled with works of fine art, a “Museum” of natural and antiquarian specimens, and a “Laboratory and an Apparatus” for scientific experiments and observations as well as a collection of books.

The laboratory idea faded away and most of the natural history specimens were eventually transferred to other institutions. But when the Athenæum opened its first art gallery in 1827, its annual exhibitions of European and American art were a spectacular success. At the time, there were no public art museums in Massachusetts. Admission fees brought in a remarkable \$10,000 by 1830. The Athenæum began to assemble a serious art collection and, once it became known as a serious art-collecting organization, gifts began to arrive as well.

Later, after the Athenæum moved to its new home on Beacon Street, a new sculpture gallery was completed on the first floor and a paintings gallery on the third. Open to the public for a fee during exhibitions, these exhibition rooms were spacious, grand, and so thoroughly warmed by an innovative hot-water furnace in the basement, that some imagined the visitor would be induced “to believe that he feels the influence of Italy while he gazes upon the artistic treasures from her classic shores.”

The idea of a “museum in Boston”

By the middle of the nineteenth century, Boston’s population was growing dramatically. Bostonians founded a host of new cultural and educational institutions, including MIT, the Boston Public Library, and the Boston Museum of Natural History (now the Boston Museum of Science).

Meanwhile, many well-to-do Bostonians traveled to Europe and even lived there for extended periods, becoming thoroughly familiar with European art museums. Among them was author and art historian Charles Callahan Perkins (1823-1886). Born into a large and well-connected Boston family which included founders of the Athenæum, Perkins spent altogether some two decades studying art and music in Europe, following his graduation from Harvard. Perkins was among the American expatriates who caught

the attention of novelist Henry James, who also had roots in Boston. Perkins, James wrote, was “a master of all the amenities... one of the most appealing of our ghosts.”

Back in Boston in 1869, Charles Perkins soon became involved in a number of cultural organizations and projects. Among them was the idea for an art museum in Boston. Charles was familiar with the South Kensington Museum in London (now the Victoria & Albert Museum), which had been founded, with a strongly educational mission, in 1852. Charles brought together leaders at a number of Boston institutions, including the Athenæum, Harvard, MIT, and the Boston Public Library, to incorporate “a Museum of Art” in Boston. Harvard eventually loaned a large group of prints, the Francis Calley Gray Collection, to the new museum (it later was recalled when Harvard built the Fogg Art Museum). MIT lent its collection of plaster architectural casts.

At the Athenæum, Charles Perkins’ older brother, Edward Newton Perkins, served as the head of the Fine Arts Committee. The brothers’ close collaboration helped make the Athenæum the most important of the founding partners.

A critical period

“Brilliant Beginnings” concentrates especially on the critical period, 1870-1876, when the Museum of Fine Arts did not yet have a home or a collection. During this period, the Athenæum’s role was extraordinary. It loaned works of art, hosted the MFA’s first exhibitions in its galleries on Beacon Street, and provided constant advice and support.

“That’s when partnership is strongest,” says Hirayama. “The Boston Athenæum was the most critical of the founding institutions and by far. The MFA held its exhibitions here until 1876. The MFA’s committee met at the Athenæum every two weeks for six years. The chairman of that committee and the chairman of the Athenæum’s Fine Arts Committee were brothers and attended each others’ meetings.”

In 1876, the Athenæum lent the MFA 56 paintings, 6 sculptures, 20 plaster casts, 52 watercolors, 7 miniature paintings, 51 chromolithographs, 500 photographs, and almost all its decorative arts. After the new MFA opened in Copley Square on July 4, 1876, the close relationship continued. The Athenæum even bought works specifically to loan to the MFA, art which never came to the Athenæum.

Postscripts

As years passed and the original MFA founders passed from the scene, the relationship gradually grew more distant. The MFA developed into a different kind of institution, a mature art museum with a world-renowned collection of its own. After the MFA opened its Copley Square building, the Athenæum converted its galleries to library space and no longer mounted public exhibitions but it kept all the art that remained at Beacon Street and has continued to collect down to the present. The Athenæum's art collection now numbers more than 100,000 works, including paintings, sculptures, prints, photographs, drawings, and decorative arts, comprising one of the largest art collections in the City of Boston.

A few works of art that the Athenæum had loaned to the MFA eventually returned to Beacon Street but most never did. In the 1970s, a century after they had left the Athenæum, in a move that became controversial, the Athenæum's officers decided to sell most of the works still on deposit at the MFA in order to build the Athenæum's endowment. Granted a right of first refusal, the MFA bought many of these works; others went to other art museums or to private collectors. A few decorative arts pieces from the Athenæum, mostly textiles, still remain on loan at the MFA. In the early twenty-first century, as part of a major renovation and expansion, the Athenæum created the Norma Jean Calderwood Gallery, which opened in 2002. Once again, the Athenæum began to host regular public exhibitions of art.

Hina Hirayama's book, "*With Éclat: The Boston Athenæum and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston* (2013, 235 pages, ISBN 978-0-934552-82-0) will be released by the University Press of New England, Hanover, New Hampshire, in March 2013. Until then it will be available exclusively at the Boston Athenæum.

About the Norma Jean Calderwood Gallery:

Located on the first floor of the Boston Athenæum's National Historic Landmark building at 10½ Beacon Street in the heart of Beacon Hill, Boston, Massachusetts, the Norman Jean Calderwood Gallery is the Athenæum's main public exhibition space. The gallery is open to the public from 9:00 a.m. to 7:45 p.m. Monday through Wednesday; from 9:00 a.m. to 5:15 p.m. on Thursday and Friday; and from 9:00 a.m. to 3:45 p.m. on Saturday. Admission to special exhibitions in the Calderwood Gallery is free to members; \$5.00 for nonmembers. Closed on major holidays.

About the Boston Athenæum:

Founded in 1807, the Boston Athenæum is Boston's first cultural institution. It combines an art museum; a leading research and membership library; and a civic forum including lectures, readings, panel discussions, and other events. Information about membership, programs, and hours can be found at www.bostonathenaeum.org.

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