



## THE BOSTON ATHENÆUM *News Release*

---

Contact: Peter Walsh, 617-720-7639; [walsh@bostonathenaeum.org](mailto:walsh@bostonathenaeum.org)  
For Immediate Release

“AMERICAN NEOCLASSIC SCULPTURE AT THE BOSTON ATHENÆUM”  
OPENS FEBRUARY 26; LEADING COLLECTION EXHIBITED  
TOGETHER FOR THE FIRST TIME

(Boston, MA, January 22, 2015) *American Neoclassic Sculpture at the Boston Athenæum*, on view at the Boston Athenæum February 26 through May 16, 2015, will reveal a collection that is among the oldest and most significant of its kind in the United States, one that helped establish an “American taste” in the visual arts.

The exhibition includes more than thirty works—sculptures by the three “founders” of American Neoclassicism: Horatio Greenough (Boston’s first professional sculptor), Thomas Crawford, and Hiram Powers; along with works by their followers; examples by such European Neoclassicists as Jean-Antoine Houdon and Bertel Thorvaldsen; and marble copies of ancient works, including the *Venus de Medici* and the *Apollo Belvedere*.

Featured works include Horatio Greenough’s *Elizabeth Perkins Cabot* (1832-33), *Venus Victrix* (1837-40), and *The Judgment of Paris* (1837-40);



Thomas Crawford (1813-1857), *Anacreon: Ode LXXII*, 1842. Marble. Boston Athenæum, gift of several subscribers, 1843. Photograph by Jerry Thompson.

Thomas Crawford's *Adam and Eve* (1855); Bertel

Thorvaldsen's *Ganymede and the Eagle* (ca. 1830-50); and

Jean-Antoine Houdon's *George Washington* (ca. 1786). A series

of sculpted portraits of

Daniel Webster by John

Frazee, Hiram Powers,

Thomas Ball, and Shobal Vail Clevenger

explores the range of treatments, from

real to ideal, used in Neoclassic

portraiture.

Organized by David Dearing, the Boston Athenæum's Susan Morse Hilles Curator of Paintings and Sculpture, *American Neoclassic Sculpture* is the first time these important works have been shown together. The show will present sculptures, many acquired directly from the artists themselves, that helped establish Neoclassicism as the first “national style” of the young United States.

### *Neoclassic Rises Again*

“Neoclassic” taste, based on the work of ancient Greek and Roman artists, dominated the West starting in the 1750s, after sensational archaeological discoveries at Pompeii, Herculaneum, and elsewhere revealed the styles the ancient Romans favored in vivid detail. It was the latest in a series of classical revivals since the fifth-century fall of Rome.

In the young United States, the idealized design language of the classical world seemed the perfect translation of the heady notions of the American Revolution, including the democracy of ancient Greece and the civic virtues of Republican Rome. The proliferation of ancient forms in the United States—columns, capitals, acanthus leaves, imposing pediments, togas (even on George Washington), drapery, idealized faces, and perfect torsos—infused the freshly-minted American republic with the grandeur and gloss of historic destiny.

*The Boston Athenæum and American Taste*

Almost as soon as it was founded in 1807, the Boston Athenæum began to acquire art along with books and periodicals— slowly at first and then, starting in the 1820s, with increasing vigor. At the same time, the Athenæum and some of its members became major patrons and promoters of American Neoclassic sculptors.

“Boston was a particular hotbed of activity,” Dr. Dearinger says of this period. “The city had patrons who were enthusiastic about classical literature and American history. So neoclassical sculpture fit right in. Boston was considered a great place for sculpture. Sculptors came up from New York and New Jersey to meet potential Boston collectors. There was nothing like it anywhere else at the time.

“Leading Massachusetts politicians like Charles Sumner and Edward Everett were major patrons, not out of self-interest but as promoters of native-born sculptors and their work,” Dearinger continues. “They supported American sculptors in every way they could, for patriotic reasons, because they felt culture was important to a democratic society and

because the work embodied democratic ideals.” Meanwhile, the Boston Athenæum was commissioning pieces and buying directly from the artists, helping to get things started.

Until the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, opened in 1876, the Boston Athenæum served as the city’s only public art museum. The Athenæum featured works by American sculptors in its annual art exhibitions and, by the time of the Civil War, had established a reputation as a leading and reliable supporter of American sculpture. By 1860, the Athenæum owned one of the largest publicly-accessible collections of sculpture in the country.

Among those early Athenæum acquisitions were sculptures: free-standing or in relief, made of plaster or marble. They included fine, full-size copies of approved ancient pieces such as the *Venus de Medici* and the *Apollo Belvedere*, as well as idealized figures and busts of important historical personages, modeled or carved by leading modern European neoclassicists. Special connections in Europe also helped the Athenæum acquire plaster casts of important ancient works made directly from the originals in European museums and private hands.

### *Americans in Italy and on the “Grand Tour”*

With the maturation of sculpture in America beginning in the 1820s, the work of native Neoclassic sculptors began to be represented in the Athenæum’s collection. Eventually, this included important works by the three “founders” of American Neoclassic sculpture, Horatio Greenough (1805-1852), Thomas Crawford (1814-1857), and Hiram Powers (1805-1873), as well as examples by their followers, many of them born in

or around Boston: Richard S. Greenough (1819-1904), Thomas R. Gould (1818-1881), Harriet Hosmer (1830-1908), Chauncey B. Ives (1810-1894), and William Wetmore Story (1819-1895).

By then, many American sculptors had moved to Italy to live and work in Florence or Rome, where the cost of living was lower and Puritan standards of behavior did not need to be observed. The change also brought the Americans closer to their classical models and to good sources of the best white marble, which was not available in the United States. Connections to Boston, however, remained as strong as ever.

“New Englanders in general were better represented on the Grand Tour than other Americans,” Dr. Dearinger says. “In the 1820s, ‘40s, and ‘50s, many of these intrepid seekers of culture were publishing travel books. Chapters in them describe visits to American studios in Italy, places which became, eventually, mandatory European tour stops.” Many works were purchased by American collectors right out of those studios. Nathaniel Hawthorne’s novel *The Marble Faun*, written after long sojourns in Florence and Rome, and Henry James’ *Roderick Hudson*, both describe the lives of American sculptors in Italy.

### *The Exhibition Installation*

The installation of *American Neoclassic Sculpture* will include sections summarizing the ancient roots of Neoclassicism; early European interpretations of it; the rise of Neoclassicism in America; the tension between the classical and the real in portraiture and in images of children; the Neoclassicist’s preference for themes from literature and religion; and the special role that Boston—and the Boston Athenæum—played in the

patronage of American sculptors during the first half of the nineteenth century.

The installation design will also reflect early nineteenth-century ideas of how best to display Neoclassic work. “Deep, deep red or deep, deep blue were considered the best wall colors for setting off white marble works,” Dearinger says. “Sculptors were sometimes involved in designing the settings for their own works in their patrons’ homes and they really cared about it. We know of projects where the artist worked out the light source, chose the deep red fabric rugs, even selected the color of the benches.” The dark blue gallery walls and dramatic lighting of the Athenæum’s installation is designed to suggest those early environments.

“If there is an overall theme of this exhibition, it is the fine line between the real and the ideal,” Dearinger concludes. “How does artist address both? In portraiture, a bust must look something like the person portrayed, so how does the artist judge where to stop along the boundary between reality and flattery?. The exhibition also explores how conservative protestant Americans were able to straddle the gap between their Puritan backgrounds and the seductive, sensuous tastes of the ancients.”

*About the Boston Athenæum:*

Conceived by its organizers as a “fountain, at which all, who choose, may gratify their thirst for knowledge,” the Boston Athenæum was founded in 1807. Today, the Athenæum’s beloved National Historic Landmark building at 10 1/2 Beacon Street hosts an active program of concerts, lectures, art exhibitions, author talks, panel discussions, and more, open to the public daily. For more information, visit [www.bostonathenaeum.org](http://www.bostonathenaeum.org).