American Neoclassic Sculpture at the Boston Athenæum

February 26 – May 17, 2015
Boston Athenæum
AMERICAN NEOCLASSIC SCULPTURE
AT THE BOSTON ATHENÆUM

This exhibition explores the various ways that American sculptors conformed to and, in some cases, deviated from the strictures of neoclassicism, the artistic style that dominated American art during the first half of the nineteenth century. These marbles and plasters, all selected from the collection of the Boston Athenæum, suggest the range of choices that neoclassical sculptors had, even within the confines of this particular and somewhat restrictive style. As careful consideration of these objects will show, neoclassicism is, in the end, truly a conversation between the ideal and the real.

The Art and Practice of Neoclassicism

The style known as neoclassicism dominated western art from the 1750s, when major archaeological sites at Pompeii, Herculanum, and elsewhere were discovered, into the second quarter of the nineteenth century, when the more robust style of romanticism began to hold sway. In the United States, with its pretensions to a democracy modeled on Greco-Roman and Enlightenment prototypes, the design language of the classical world was perfect for the translation of heady ideas into a new visual and accessible ideal that became neoclassicism.

Neoclassical sculptors typically preferred to use white marble for their creations. For them, marble had three advantages: (1) it is easier to carve than harder stones such as granite and is more efficient to use than metal, such as bronze, which can be cast only through a complicated, multi-step process; (2) marble can be polished to a smooth and pleasing finish; and (3) the purity of white marble can be a symbol of the presumed purity of the person or character being depicted. The neoclassicists’ passion for fine marble inspired many of them, including the Americans, to travel to and even settle permanently in Italy. In the quarries near Rome and Florence, they could acquire the high-quality marble that they needed and readily find the local craftsmen who knew how to handle it. An additional incentive was the cost of living, which, during these decades, was much lower in Italy than in America, England, and elsewhere in Europe. And of course Italy offered immediate aesthetic gratification in those remnants of the classical past—fragmented sculptures and partially ruined buildings—that were visible almost everywhere one went.

Stylistically, neoclassical sculptors felt that it was their job to take what nature provided and make it perfect. In this way, art could get closer to the original ideals of creation and, in religious terms, bring us closer to God—or, as the case may be, the gods. Neoclassical sculpture is recognizable, therefore, not only by its use of white marble but by the perfected form that the neoclassicist typically gave to his or her rendering of the human body. The closer the figure came to total nudity, the more obvious would be its perfection. Meanwhile, if the neoclassical artist chose to reference a narrative—as in, say, the story of Adam and Eve—the ideal forms that he or she creates would more likely transmit the didactic or moralizing lesson of the story. In doing so, they fulfill a traditional requirement of great art—and simultaneously provide a viable excuse for the nudity. Even in portraiture, white marble, classical garments, and a dignified or dramatic face can be combined to imply the historical significance or moral greatness of the person being depicted.

Sculpture at the Boston Athenæum

As mentioned above, all of the objects in this exhibition are from the collection of the Boston Athenæum. The Athenæum began acquiring works of art soon after it was established in 1807. Among these were sculptures, free-standing or in relief, made of plaster or marble. These included fine, full-size casts or copies of ancient works such as the Venus de’ Medici and the Apollo Belvedere, as well as idealized figures and busts of important historical personages modeled by leading European sculptors. With the maturation of the art of sculpture in America beginning in the 1820s, the Athenæum became an active supporter of its practitioners, eventually holding special exhibitions devoted to sculpture, and even giving American sculptors direct commissions to create works specifically for the Athenæum’s collection. Meanwhile, a number of Bostonians were forming their own sculpture collections; and some of these collectors eventually gave selections from their holdings to the Athenæum. Native-born sculptors were soon well represented at the Athenæum and eventually the collection would include masterworks by the three “founders” of American neoclassicism—Horatio Greenough, Thomas Crawford, and Hiram Powers—as well as by their followers. By 1860, the Athenæum owned one of the largest collections of sculpture in the country.

That tradition continues. Today, the Boston Athenæum owns over 225 sculptures, and continues to add fine examples annually. Of the Athenæum’s holdings in this area, about one-third embody one or more attributes of neoclassicism. For the first time, this exhibition unites, in a gallery setting, a selection of masterworks from this part of the collection. Together, these objects help us comprehend the ancient roots of neoclassicism; suggest some of the contemporary European interpretations of the style; track the rise of neoclassicism in America; and encourages us to contemplate the tension between the ideal and the real. At the same time, the exhibition reminds us of the special role that the Boston Athenæum played in the development of American art, especially American sculpture, during the first half of the nineteenth century.

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The Susan Morse Hilles Curator of Paintings & Sculpture
CHECKLIST FOR THE EXHIBITION
All works are from the collection of the Boston Athenaeum.

Influences: Ancient & Modern

Apollo Belvedere, ca. 1795 (after the Hellenistic original)
Marble, 66.1 x 56.2 x 40 cm
Gift of Henry Pickering, 1824 (UH72)

Psyche of Capua, n.d. (after the ancient Greek original)
Marble, 44.3 x 21.2 x 19.3 cm
Gift of Miss Alice Newell, 1970 (UH41)

Venus de’ Medici, ca. 1790 (after the Hellenistic original)
Marble, 158.4 x 43.8 x 47.6 cm
Gift of Hannah Sawyer Lee, 1861 (UH67)

Zeus Orticoli (Jupiter), 1848 (after the Hellenistic original)
Plaster, 82.1 x 58.2 x 43.8 cm
Gift of George C. Ward, 1857 (UH8)

Giuseppe Ceracchi (1751–1802)
Alexander Hamilton, ca. 1815
Plaster, 60.2 x 32.5 x 23.4 cm
Gift of Samuel Salisbury Jr., 1817 (UH159)

Francis Chantrey (1781–1841)
Sir Walter Scott, ca. 1820–1826
Plaster, 76.4 x 53.7 x 32.2 cm
Gift of Thomas Handsyed Perkins, 1827 (UH142)

Jean-Antoine Houdon (1741–1828)
George Washington, ca. 1786
Plaster, 54.1 x 36 x 28.7 cm (integral base)
Gift of the heirs of Joseph Coolidge Jr., 1912 (UH150)

Luigi Persico (1791–1860)
Nicholas Biddle, 1837
Plaster, 53.6 x 40.3 x 23 cm
Gift of Issac P. Davis, 1838 (UH104)

Bertel Thorvaldsen (1770–1844)
Ganymede and the Eagle, ca. 1830–1850
Marble, 45 x 57.8 x 24.6 cm
Gift of Samuel Eliot Morison, 1956 (UH146)

The Literary Ideal

Thomas Crawford (1813–1857)
Christian Pilgrim in Sight of Rome, 1847
Marble, 95 x 34.5 x 28.9 cm
Gift of the heirs of Eliza Callahan Cleveland, 1914 (UH147)

Thomas Crawford (1813–1857)
Adam and Eve, 1855
Marble, 137.8 x 62.2 x 51.9 cm
Deposited by Emeline Austin Wadsworth, 1867 (UH16)

Thomas Ridgeway Gould (1818–1881)
Satan, 1862
Marble, 56.2 x 37.2 x 28.8 cm
Gift of several subscribers, 1878 (UH80)

Thomas Ridgeway Gould (1818–1881)
Christ, 1863
Marble, 54.7 x 38.6 x 36.4 cm
Gift of several subscribers, 1878 (UH81)
Horatio Greenough (1805–1852)
_Venus Victrix_, 1837–1840
Marble, 145.3 x 41 x 47.6 cm
Gift of the estate of John Lowell Jr., 1842 (UH84)

Richard Saltonstall Greenough (1819–1904)
_Idealized Head of a Woman_, 1868 (illustrated)
Marble, 54.9 x 48 x 29 cm
Athenæum purchase, 1956 (UH125)

Harriet Hosmer (1830–1908)
Will o’ the Wisps, ca. 1856 (illustrated)
Marble, 90.2 x 54.6 x 38.7 cm
Gift of Julia Bryant Paine, 1876 (UH22)

Larkin Goldsmith Mead (1835–1910)
_Echo_, ca. 1863
Marble, 92 x 38 x 25 cm
Athenæum purchase, Susan Morse Hilles Fund for Art Acquisitions, 2014 (UH236)

_The Neoclassical Portrait_

John Frazee (1790–1852)
_John Marshall_, 1834–1835
Marble, 66.8 x 56.3 x 41.8 cm
Gift of Thomas Handsayd Perkins, 1835 (UH76)

Horatio Greenough (1805–1852)
_John Quincy Adams_, 1828–1829 (illustrated)
Marble, 59 x 35.7 x 21.7 cm
Athenæum purchase, 1829 (UH169)

Clark Mills (1815–1883)
_John Caldwell Calhoun_, 1845
Plaster, 61.7 x 35 x 23.3 cm (integral base)
Deposited by Benjamin J. Howland, 1846 (UH167)

Joanna Quiner (1796–1869)
_Robert Rantoul_, ca. 1841
Plaster, 73.8 x 50.2 x 31.2 cm (integral base)
Gift of the artist, 1842 (UH14)

William Wetmore Story (1819–1895)
_Elizabeth Barrett Browning_, 1866
Marble, 44.8 x 44 x 23.4 cm
Gift of the children of Mr. and Mrs. Thornton K. Lothrop: Thornton K. Lothrop, Mrs. Algernon Coolidge, and Miss Mary B. Lothrop, 1931 (UH36)

_The Real vs. the Ideal_

Thomas Ball (1819–1911)
_Daniel Webster_, 1852
Plaster, 81.4 x 61.8 x 39 cm
Gift of Gershom Bradford, 1954 (UH111)

Thomas Ball (1819–1911) (attributed)
_Daniel Webster_, n.d.
Marble, 14.6 x 9.5 x 5.7 cm
Athenæum purchase, 2008 (UH225)

Shobal Vail Clevenger (1812–1843)
_Daniel Webster_, n.d.
Plaster, 75.3 x 50.9 x 28.5 cm
Gift of the artist, 1840 (UH184)

John Frazee (1790–1852)
_Daniel Webster_, 1833–1834
Marble, 66 x 60 x 34.5 cm
Gift of several subscribers, 1835 (UH3)
Hiram Powers (1805–1873)
*Daniel Webster*, 1846
Marble, 58.6 x 42.5 x 25.7 cm
Athenæum purchase, 1842 (UH21)

**The Perfect Child**

Thomas Ball (1819–1911)
*Herbert Skinner*, 1855
Marble, 38.6 x 32 x 17.6 cm
Deposited by Francis Skinner, brother of the sitter? (UH85)

Thomas Ball (1819–1911)
*La Petite Pensee*, 1872 (illustrated)
Marble, 49.5 x 31.6 x 18.7 cm
Athenæum purchase, 2011 (UH230)

Horatio Greenough (1805–1852)
*Elizabeth Perkins Cabot*, 1832–1833
Marble, 44.4 x 31.3 x 21.8 cm
Athenæum purchase, 1983 (UH192)

Chauncey Bradley Ives (1810–1894)
*Ellen Shao*, 1854
Marble, 53.3 x 35.6 x 17.8 cm
Gift of Mrs. Ellen Shaw Kean and Mr. Lloyd McKim
Garrison, 1995 (UH206)

Richard Henry Park (1832–1902)
*Head of a Girl*, n.d.
Plaster, 47 cm (diameter)
Athenæum purchase, 2008 (UH220)

**The Neoclassical Relief**

Thomas Crawford (1813–1857)
*Anacreon, Ode LXXII*, 1842
Marble, 67 x 67 x 8.1 cm (round)
Gift of several subscribers, 1843 (UH156)

Horatio Greenough (1805–1852)
*The Judgment of Paris*, 1837–1840
Marble, 62.5 x 54.3 x 43.3 cm
Gift of the estate of John Lowell Sr., 1842 (UH18)

Richard Saltonstall Greenough (1819–1904)
*Thomas Handsayd Perkins, ca. 1846*
Marble, 50.5 x 41.8 x 5.6 cm (oval)
Gift of the Mercantile Library Association, 1952 (UH 47)

John Adams Jackson (1825–1879)
*Daute*, n.d.
Marble, 41.2 x 33 x 5.8 cm
Bequest of Jane M. Jackson, 1916 (UH60)

Photography by Jerry L. Thompson

Thanks to Vinnie Marasa for his design sense, Artex for their brute strength, Biddy Owens for the fabric, and Hina Hirayama for everything else.
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