



BOSTON ATHENÆUM

“REQUIRED READING: REIMAGINING A COLONIAL LIBRARY”
OPENS SEPTEMBER 17, 2019 AT THE BOSTON ATHENÆUM

Exhibition will explore Boston’s colonial history, fine crafts of bookbinding and furniture-making, and meaning of “essential knowledge”

Boston, MA — May 28, 2019 —The Boston Athenæum announces a major exhibition, “Required Reading: Reimagining a Colonial Library,” that will showcase and interpret the King’s Chapel Library Collection, one of the surviving treasures of 17th century Boston. The exhibition will be open to the public from September 17, 2019 to March 14, 2020 in the Norma Jean Calderwood Gallery on the library’s first floor.

“Required Reading” will tell the story of colonial Bostonians’ quest for “essential knowledge”— and invite visitors to reflect on their own “must-read” lists. In 1698, the set of 221 books crossed the Atlantic on *HMS Deptford*, a fifty-gun man-of-war, to serve as a compact library of necessary works for King’s Chapel, the first Anglican church in Boston. They had been chosen by Reverend Thomas Bray of London, an appointed commissary, or spiritual guide, to Anglican outposts in the American colonies. Cached safely when the minister, loyal to the British Crown, fled Boston in 1776, the books re-emerged after the American Revolution, and were deposited at the Athenæum in 1823.

“Required Reading” will feature a full-scale replica of the massive, ark-like bookcase designed in 1883 to house the historic collection. The replica, built in 2019 by exhibition designer Brent Budsberg of Current Projects and supported in part by the Chipstone Foundation, is an achievement in contemporary fine woodworking. It will be modified in an innovative way, enabling visitors to immerse themselves in the rich contexts of the cabinet, its books, and their legacy.

As visitors examine compelling and important selections from the colonial library, they will be inspired to imagine their own definitions of “required reading” in the present day, “filling” the cabinet with their own personal touchstones.

“The stories of the books’ arrival in New England as ‘necessary and useful’ texts for teaching and learning, their importance to religious leaders in Boston, and their impressive state of

preservation—through the tumult of a city rocked by revolution—are dramatic and little-known,” said the Athenæum’s John Buchtel, Curator of Rare Books and Head of Special Collections. “More than three centuries later, their appeal is not simply as a time capsule or as examples of the craft of bookbinding, but also as a profound prompt, giving us the opportunity to imagine the readings we’d select as essential in our own lives.”

Rare and notable items in the King’s Chapel Library Collection:

- An atlas of the known world (1693)
- Sir Walter Raleigh’s *History of the World* (1666)
- A mathematics textbook covering everything from practical geometry to logarithms (1690)
- A nine-language Bible, the “London Polyglot” (1657)
- A Biblical concordance compiled by Massachusetts minister Samuel Newman (1658)

Just steps from Boston’s Freedom Trail, “Required Reading” will offer visitors a rare, up-close view of these influential works, in an exquisite library that has celebrated and preserved Boston’s revolutionary history from its inception. Exhibition visitors will also be able to explore the Athenæum’s permanent art collection on the first floor.

ABOUT THE BOSTON ATHENÆUM

The Boston Athenæum, one of the most distinguished libraries in the nation and an early Boston cultural institution, was founded in 1807. Its landmark 1849 building and architecturally significant reading rooms at 10½ Beacon Street welcome readers, thinkers, writers, and learners in the heart of Boston.

Highlights of the library’s holdings include the King’s Chapel Library collection, with roots in the 17th-century settlement of Boston; rare publications in Native American languages; the personal library of George Washington; historic early European printed works; and numerous works of fine art, including portraits of notable Americans such as Hannah Adams, John Marshall, and Alexander Hamilton, and by artists such as Gilbert Stuart, John Singer Sargent, Allan Rohan Crite, and Polly Thayer Starr. An extensive collection on the art of the book includes examples from many eras of bookbinding and fine printing, as well as a significant collection of contemporary artists’ books. Learn more at bostonathenaeum.org.

ABOUT THE CHIPSTONE FOUNDATION

The Chipstone Foundation is a Wisconsin-based foundation dedicated to promoting American decorative arts scholarship. Originating from the private collection of Stanley and Polly Stone, the foundation uses its objects and resources to support decorative arts projects and publications at other institutions, seeking to find “newer ways to look at old things.” Learn more at chipstone.org.

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