# Step back in time...

Welcome to the Providence Athenæum! For nearly 200 years, this library has welcomed illustrious writers, spirited thinkers, and intellectually curious community members to engage in reading, conversation, and debate. Today, our mission is to enrich the mind, inspire the spirit, and elevate the public discourse.

These self-guided tours will help you explore the Athenæum, its history, and its collections. The tours can be taken separately or sequentially.

Before you begin your journey, let's start with the basics. You can pronounce athenæum as ath-uh-NEE-um or ath-uh-NAY-um. The " $\alpha$ " in the library's name is a ligature mark called ash and is used in the traditional spelling.

An athenæum is defined most broadly as an association for the advancement of learning. The term takes its name from Athena, Greek goddess of wisdom. Its lineage derives in equal measure from ancient European libraries and learning communities (the first organization called 'Athenæum' was founded by the Roman emperor Hadrian in about A.D. 133) and from early American ideals of self-reliance and community service.

Enjoy your explorations!

Please note: our historic building contains multiple 19th-century staircases and no elevator. If you would prefer to stay on the Main Level, the Collections & Authors tour does not require stairs. Feel free to turn on the light switches at the end of alcoves.



### Self-Guided Tours

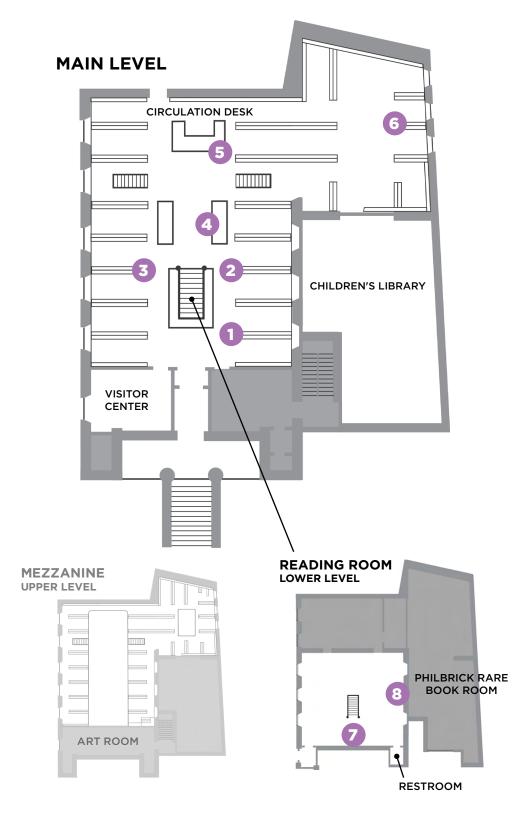
<u>I. History & Building</u> <u>II. Art & Sculpture</u> <u>III. Collections & Authors</u> <u>IV. The Legend of the Fountain</u>

### History & Building

LOCATIONS Main Level & lower Reading Room

> **TIME** Approx. 20 minutes

STARTING POINT Bust of Benjamin Franklin, in front of the first alcove on the right side of the Main Level







### 1 MEMBERSHIP LIBRARIES

We begin our exploration of the Athenæum's history and building at a bust of **BENJAMIN FRANKLIN**, a great friend to libraries. Before tax-supported public libraries existed, there were limited ways for people to access reading material unless they had the means to maintain a personal library or were part of a university community. Recognizing the importance of making such knowledge available, Franklin founded the first American membership library in 1731, the Library Company of Philadelphia.

**MEMBERSHIP, OR SUBSCRIPTION, LIBRARIES** allowed individuals to pool their resources to maintain a circulating collection, either by becoming shareholders or by paying monthly membership dues.

In his autobiography, Franklin wrote, "These Libraries have improv'd the general Conversation of the Americans, made the common Tradesmen and Farmers as intelligent as most Gentlemen from other Countries, and perhaps have contributed in some degree to the Stand so generally made throughout the Colonies in Defense of their Privileges."

Once common across the United States, most membership libraries have been absorbed into public libraries, but a handful continue to thrive. Many hold special collections of rare books, manuscripts, maps, prints, and photographs.

Find the archival photo two alcoves to the left from Benjamin Franklin for POINT 2.

Porcelain figure group of Benjamin Franklin and Louis XVI signing the Treaty of Alliance in 1778, attributed to Lemire, c. 1780-85. It is one of only six known copies.

Whereas a Collection or Library of usefull and Edifying Books will most certainly tend to the Benefit and Instruction of the Inhabitants of this Jown and County of ~~ Providence, and the Rising Generation thereto belonging .\_\_\_ Therefore We the Subferibers confidering the Advantages. thereof and the Improvements which may be thereby made, not only by us bu by our Tofferity, and for the Encouragement of the Same, have hereunh voluntarily Subfiribed our Names, and opposite thereto such Sum e Money as we are willing to contribute towards the usefull and handable Design aforesaid. Which said Sum by us Severally ~ Subferibed opposite to our respective Names, We the Subferibers do hereby Promife to pay on Demand, unto such Perfon or Perfons shall (when the Subforistion is full) be by the Majority of us H Subferibers nominated and appointed to receive the same, and which, by and with Our Approbation, or the Majority of us, is to t be by such Receiver appropriated to and for the life aforesaid, a to and for no other life or Surpole whatfoever. In Witness and Confirmation of which We have hereunto Severally set our Nam this Twenty Second Day of March anno Domini One Thousand Seven Hundred and Fifty Three.

There is no Subfiription for the Use aloresaid to be taken us the Subfiription of Inventy Five Pounds Old Tenor, but as much more as any well Spirited Subfiriber shall think proper.

#### SURVIVING MEMBERSHIP LIBRARIES

Library Company of Philadelphia (Philadelphia, PA), 1731 Redwood Library and Athenæum (Newport, RI), 1747 Charleston Library Society (Charleston, SC), 1748 Providence Library Company (Providence, RI), 1753\* (dissolved in 1836 to become the Providence Athenæum) New York Society Library (New York, NY) 1754 Boston Athenæum (Boston, MA), 1807 Salem Athenæum (Salem, MA), 1810 Athenæum of Philadelphia (Philadelphia, PA), 1814 Maine Charitable Mechanic Association (Portland, ME), 1815 Portsmouth Athenæum (Portsmouth, NH), 1817 Center for Fiction (New York, NY) [previously Mercantile Library], 1820 General Society Library (New York, NY), 1820 Institute Library (New Haven, CT), 1826 Nantucket Athenæum (Nantucket, MA), 1834 Mercantile Library (Cincinnati, OH), 1835 \*Providence Athenæum (Providence, RI), 1836 St. Louis Mercantile Library Association (St. Louis, MO), 1846 Mechanics' Institute Library (San Francisco, CA), 1854 Minneapolis Athenæum (Minnetonka, MN), 1859 St. Johnsbury Athenæum (St. Johnsbury, VT), 1871 Lanier Library (Tryon, NC), 1890 Athenæum Music and Arts Library (La Jolla, CA), 1899

## CATALOGUE Jaber OF ALL THE BOMEN

BOOKS

BELONGING TO THE

PROVIDENCE LIBRARY.

N. B. Those marked thus [ \* ] are such BOOKS as were faved in the Proprietors Hands, when the late LIBRARY was burnt.

PROVIDENCE, N. E : PRINTED AND SOLD BY WATERMAN AND RUSSELL, AT THE NEW PRINT-ING OFFICE, AT THE PAPER-MILL. M, DCC, LXYIII.



### 2 PROVIDENCE LIBRARY COMPANY

FROM THE ARCHIVES: Athenæum exterior, c. 1860s

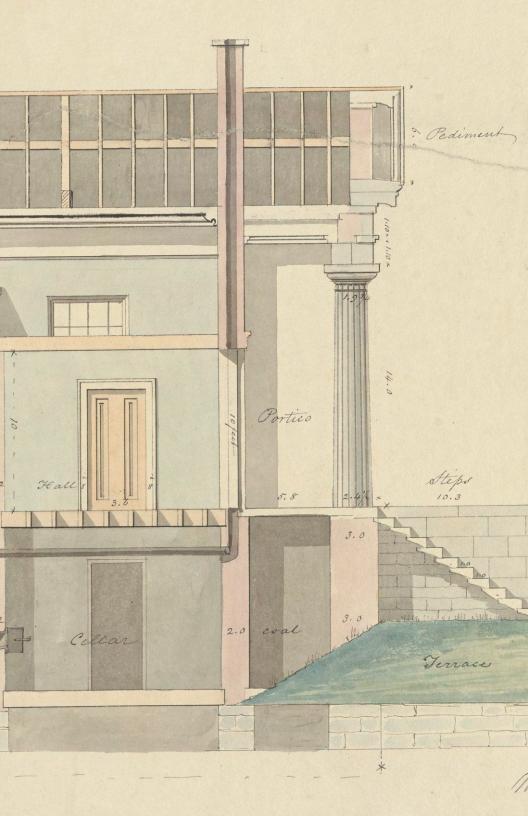
This is the oldest known photograph of the library, but the Athenæum's roots stretch back more than a century before it was taken. In 1753, recognizing that "a Collection or Library of usefull and Edifying Books will most certainly tend to the Benefit and Instruction of the Inhabitants of this Town," 85 men and one woman came together to establish one of the first publicly accessible libraries in North America, the **PROVIDENCE LIBRARY COMPANY**.

Stephen Hopkins, a Quaker scholar, politician, and signatory of the Declaration of Independence, was one of the new library's greatest supporters and sat on the committee responsible for its first order of books. 345 volumes arrived from England in 1756, including Homer's *Odyssey*, Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, and Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*.

The Providence Library Company was originally housed in the old Town House on Meeting Street, but disaster struck on December 24, 1758 when the building went up in flames. Only 71 volumes survived the fire because they were checked out by members at the time.

By 1836, a new nation had been established, the population of Providence had grown, and another membership library had emerged, called the Providence Athenæum. After much debate, the two institutions decided to dissolve their corporations in 1836 and create a new library: the **PROVIDENCE ATHENÆUM** as we know it today.

Walk across the library to the alcove directly behind you to find another archival photograph and POINT 3.







FROM THE ARCHIVES: Athenæum exterior, c. 1875

Within months of the Athenæum's founding, businessman and philanthropist Moses Brown Ives made a generous offer: he would donate a plot of land on Benefit Street for "an Edifice to be erected in stone or Brick," as well as \$10,000, if an equal amount could be raised to match his support.

While the library raised funds and rented temporary rooms in the Arcade (an indoor shopping mall which still stands downtown today), the building committee began the search for an architect.

They hired the famous Philadelphia-based architect WILLIAM STRICKLAND who designed the library in the GREEK REVIVAL style. Costs totaled just under \$19,000, and the library opened the new building in July of 1838.

You're standing in the original MAIN HALL. Though the exterior remains mostly unchanged (as evidenced by this 1870s archival photograph), the interior received multiple updates, largely in response to the growing collection:

1849: The central staircase was added, and gaslights were installed (the original gas light fixtures, now electrified, still encircle the room).

1851: The lower-level **READING ROOM** opened.

1868: The bookcases were raised to ceiling height and the mezzanine level was added.

1896: An old storage room above the front entrance was converted into the current **ART ROOM**, and electricity was installed. (Learn more about the Art Room in the Art & Sculpture Tour.)

Turn around and walk to the card catalog for POINT 4.







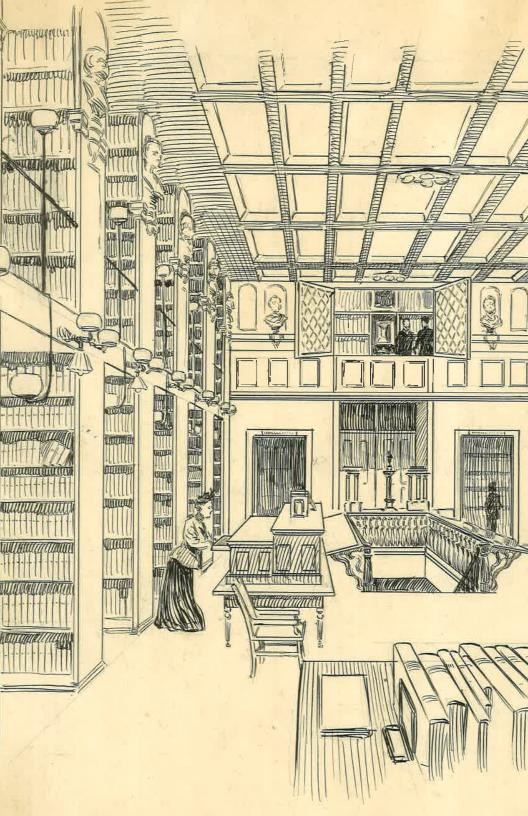
FROM THE ARCHIVES: Athenæum Main Hall, 1921

This is the Athenæum's **CARD CATALOG**, introduced to the library in 1883. In 1895, librarian Grace Leonard was hired to catalog the entire collection using the newly invented Dewey Decimal System. At that point, the library held 56,000 items in its collection, and Grace soldiered on for 13 years to finish properly cataloging each volume! She became the Athenæum's first female Head Librarian in 1911 and held the position for 30 years until she retired in 1941. Please feel free to open up a drawer and flip through some of the cards. You may come across some in Grace's handwriting.

You will also see examples of LIBRARY HAND, a special style of handwriting taught in library schools. It was developed by Melvil Dewey and Thomas Edison to provide uniformity and legibility in card catalogs and was used until typewriters became widespread.

Staff still occasionally use the card catalog today to find books that have not been entered into our online catalog.

Make your way to the right-hand side of the Circulation Desk for POINT 5.





### 5 THE CIRCULATION DESK

FROM THE ARCHIVES: The Circulation Desk, 1941

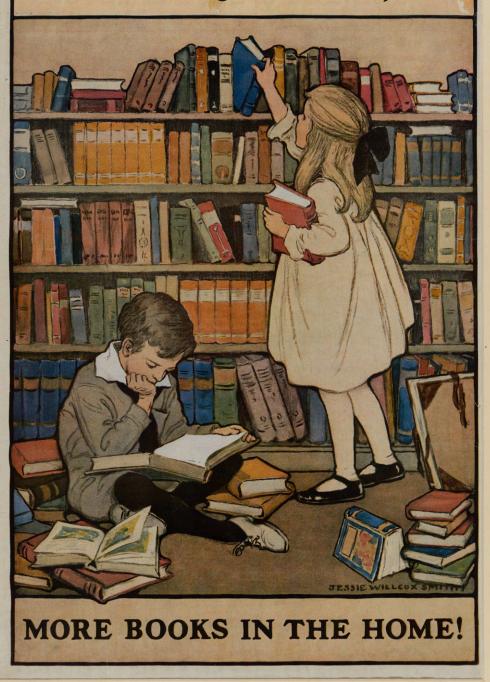
Welcome to the **CIRCULATION DESK**, the hub of all library activity here at the Athenæum. Although we are a historic institution, we are also a fully functioning modern library. Our collection includes the newest fiction and nonfiction titles, as well as DVDs, audiobooks, and streaming services. While we welcome non-members to enjoy the space and collections while visiting, **MEMBERSHIP** allows you to check out materials and includes many other benefits.

The Circulation Desk is home to our **LIBRARIANS** and library assistants. You can see what the desk looked like in 1941 in this photograph. The woman standing on the far right is Grace Leonard, whose handwriting you might have just discovered in the card catalog.

The Athenæum's 42nd Annual Report, published in 1877, included the following characteristics of the perfect librarian: "The Librarian and his assistant are supposed to have some acquaintance with all the books in the Library, they must inform themselves as to the sources of knowledge on all sorts of subjects... they stake their professional reputation on being able to direct the inquisitive mind not merely to a source of knowledge, but the very best source... there must be patience with dullness and imperturbable good nature with heedlessness and stupidity." That's a high bar!

Now walk down the aisle to your right into the Arnold Room to find an archival photograph of a children's story hour on the end of an alcove (under "The Rhode Island Collection" sign) and POINT 6.

### CHILDREN'S BOOK WEEK NOVEMBER 15th to 20th 1920





### 6 BUILDING ADDITIONS

FROM THE ARCHIVES: Story hour in the children's area, 1928

The Athenæum has always welcomed children, and creating a dedicated space for them and their families was a particular priority for the design of two significant building additions. Families have often maintained memberships for generations, and it's not uncommon for this area of the library to be overrun with avid young readers. In this 1928 photograph, local children enjoy a story hour exactly where you are standing. In the background, you can spot Alice McGrath, the babysitter of some of the children and a future librarian herself.

You are currently in the first major addition made to the building in 1914. Designed by **NORMAN MORRISON ISHAM**, it was intended to reflect the style of the original Greek Revival architecture. This three-story addition made space for periodical storage in the lower level, a **CHILDREN'S LIBRARY** on the first floor, and additional bookshelves and storage upstairs. It now houses book storage, the Reference Department, and the shelf space seen above you.

Through the glass doors to your right lies the second large addition to the library. It was designed by renowned designer and architect **WARREN PLATNER** in 1978 and is a continuation of the 1914 addition that brings the Athenæum flush up against the townhouses next door. This expansion contains the **PHILBRICK RARE BOOK ROOM** on the lower level, a larger Children's Library here on the main floor, and staff offices above on the mezzanine.

Now go back to the main hall and walk down the central staircase into the Reading Room, **POINT 7**.





### 🕖 THE READING ROOM

Welcome to the Athenæum's **READING ROOM**! By day, this area is a quiet place to study or read, but by night it becomes a lively event space. The library regularly hosts lectures, reading groups, social events, weddings, and more.

When the building originally opened in 1838, this area was home to the **FRANKLIN SOCIETY**, an amateur scientific organization that shared 251 Benefit Street with the Athenæum. Unfortunately the space proved too damp for their specimens, and they moved out in 1849. The library then added a connecting stair between the levels and moved materials into this space.

After a door exiting to College Street was added to the Reading Room in the 1890s (now used only during programs), a former member charmingly remarked, "I have long thought the Providence Athenæum the most delightful of libraries. It is half up and half down hill so that you may go in on one level and come out higher up, which is what any Library should do for one... I do not know if the celestial city has anything better."

Today, the Reading Room houses "the 800s," the Dewey classification for books related to drama, poetry, essays, and rhetoric, as well as newspapers and periodicals.

Walk towards the glass doorway cut into the original stonework (opposite the wall of windows) to find the **PHILBRICK RARE BOOK ROOM, POINT 8**.

The Philbrick Room is staff only, but you can take a look through the glass. Please do not attempt to open the door.





### 8 THE PHILBRICK RARE BOOK ROOM

The Philbrick Room is staff only, but you can take a look through the glass. Please do not attempt to open the door.

Through this door lies the **PHILBRICK RARE BOOK ROOM**, where the Athenæum's Special Collections and Archives are kept. It is open during special exhibitions, and the materials inside are viewable for research appointments.

The library's greatest treasures are stored inside, including:

- The Athenæum's oldest book, an ILLUMINATED MEDIEVAL MANUSCRIPT dating to 1300
- THE FOUNDERS COLLECTION 45 books saved from the Providence Library Company fire in 1758
- FIRST EDITIONS of many important works, including The Raven and Other Poems by Edgar Allan Poe, Moby Dick by Herman Melville, Little Women by Louisa May Alcott, A Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens, Walden by Henry David Thoreau, and a very rare Leaves of Grass by Walt Whitman, purchased from a local bookseller for \$1.25 in 1855
- Albertus Seba's handsomely illustrated 4-volume **CABINET OF CURIOSITIES** published between 1734-1765
- A **GOLD MECHANICAL PENCIL** owned by Athenæum architect William Strickland

You might be wondering about the large Egyptian-style cabinet in the center of the room. It originally housed the massive *DESCRIPTION DE L'ÉGYPTE*, published between 1809-1828 by Napoleon's Imperial Press (learn more about this cabinet by continuing to the Art & Sculpture Tour).



This concludes the History & Building self-guided tour. You can continue on to the Art & Sculpture tour which begins here.

Remember to turn to the <u>last page</u> before you leave, as we have one final piece of Athenæum lore to pass on...

### Art & Sculpture

#### LOCATIONS

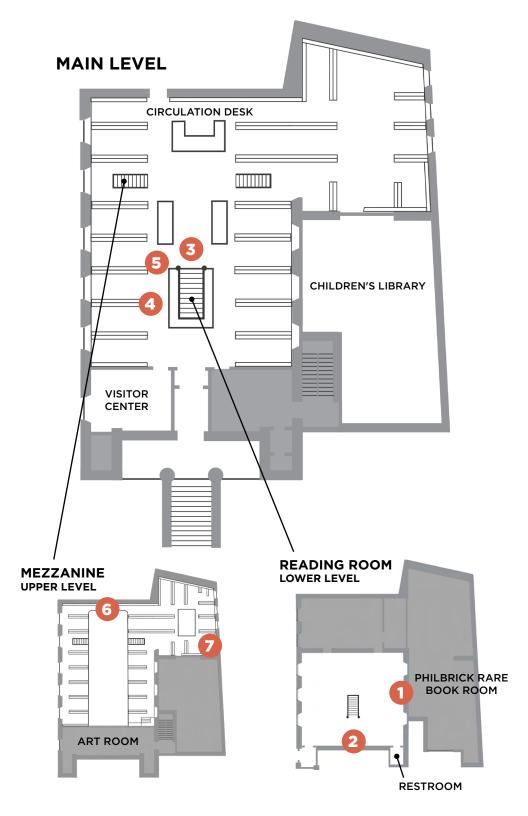
Reading Room, Main Level, & Mezzanine (visitors must be 10 or older to visit the mezzanine)

#### TIME

Approx. 15 minutes

#### STARTING POINT

The Philbrick Rare Book Room in the lower level Reading Room (look for the glass door cut into the original stone, opposite the wall of windows)



### 



### THE EGYPTIAN CABINET

### The Philbrick Room is staff only, but you can take a look through the glass. Please do not attempt to open the door.

We begin our exploration of art at the Athenæum in front of the downstairs **PHILBRICK RARE BOOK ROOM**, right off the Reading Room.

If you look through the glass door, you'll see one of the most unique pieces of furniture in the library's collection. The **EGYPTIAN CABINET** (built 1838–1840) was designed to house *Description de l'Égypte*, a 25-volume set documenting Napoleon's 1798–99 French expedition to Egypt.

The Athenæum purchased its copy of the *Description* in 1838 from the estate of a banished French statesman for about \$500, an enormous sum at the time. The set is massive; its largest volume is a double elephant folio, measuring an astounding 29.5" tall x 43.5" wide. Books this large cannot fit on standard library shelves, so the library commissioned this special cabinet to store the set.

The cabinet was designed by Athenæum member John Russell Bartlett and English architect Frederick Catherwood to evoke an Egyptian temple, with exterior decoration based on plates in the *Description*. The short sides open to reveal deep drawers in which the volumes could safely lay flat.

Now walk towards the large portrait at the bottom of the main stairs behind you for **POINT 2**.





### 2 GEORGE WASHINGTON

This handsome portrait of **GEORGE WASHINGTON** was the first piece of art acquired by the Athenæum and is a copy of one of the most well-known 18th-century American paintings. In 1796, **GILBERT STUART** painted a portrait of George Washington for William Petty, first Marquis of Lansdowne, who helped shape the 1783 peace between the United States and Great Britain following the American Revolution and the Jay Treaty of 1796. The original is now in the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C.

The copy of the Lansdowne portrait that hangs in the Athenæum was painted by an unnamed "accomplished Italian artist," and was given to the library in 1838 by Samuel Larned (1788–1846), a Providence merchant and the Chargé d'Affaires to Chile and Peru. He donated the portrait on the occasion of the opening of the Benefit Street building, with the hope that its placement in the public halls of the library would encourage the virtuous and patriotic character of Providence's youth.

Now walk up the stairs to the Main Level and look up for **POINT 3**.





















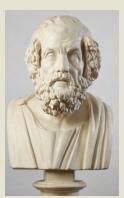










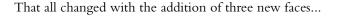


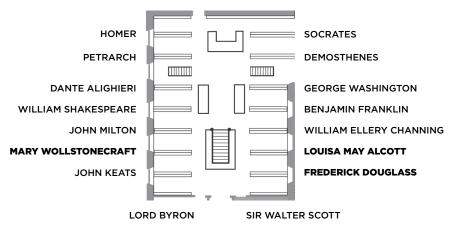


### 3 THE BUSTS

Surrounding the top of library's mezzanine level are 16 niches holding "**WELL-EXECUTED BUSTS** of illustrious personages, ancient and modern." 10 of these figures were donated to the library in 1840 by member James Phalen. Phalen, a Providence resident, was a managing contractor for U.S. lotteries, and in 1838, his Exchange and Lottery Office was located on North Main Street, very close to the newly opened Athenæum.

Until recently, all the figures displayed here were white men born before the 19th century. Additionally, all the busts were gifts to, rather than commissions or purchases made by, the library, so it is unlikely that the Athenæum played a role in selecting who was represented.







#### THE BUST PROJECT

In 2018, the Hayden Special Collections Development Fund allowed the Athenæum to make a significant investment in pieces of art that strengthened the collection and spoke to the library's inclusive mission. The Athenæum commissioned Skylight Studios in Woburn, MA, to craft three new plaster busts to sit in the Main Hall. The figures selected were philosopher and proto-feminist MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT, abolitionist and writer FREDERICK DOUGLASS, and author and social reformer LOUISA MAY ALCOTT. They were installed on the mezzanine in 2020.

The creation of each bust required different approaches and technologies. Wollstonecraft is a completely original bust portrait and is the first public sculpture of the author in North America. Douglass was created with the help of a 3D scan of a 1879 bust by Johnson Mundy, now at the University of Rochester. Alcott is a copy of the Concord Free Public Library's 1892 work by Walton Ricketson and was made using traditional casting techniques.

Look up to spot these three new figures on the mezzanine, before turning your attention to **POINT 4**, a 7' figure of **ATHENA** (directly below Mary Wollstonecraft).









With a name like Athenæum, it's no wonder the library recognizes **ATHENA** as our patron. As the goddess of wisdom, she is an appropriate symbol of the library and even appears as our beloved logo drawn by Rhode Island School of Design student Ralph Leete Foster in 1901 (above).

The larger-than-life plaster statue of **ATHENA LEMNIA** in the Main Hall is on long-term loan from Wheaton College in Norton, MA. Wheaton purchased it for \$75 in 1913 from the Boston casting firm P.P. Caproni and Brother (the descendant of this company would later restore the library's 19th-century plaster busts and create the three new sculptures of Wollstonecraft, Douglass, and Alcott). The work is based on a lost bronze statue from Athens' Acropolis by the sculptor Phidias, created between 450-440 BCE.

Look above the Circulation Desk, and you'll see another Athena perched on the mezzanine. This is a reproduction of the head of the **PALLAS OF VELLETRI**, and beneath her you'll find an often remarked-upon inscription by scholar Laurel Thatcher Ulrich: "Well-behaved women rarely make history."

Now turn back towards the front of the building, and look through the latticed windows above the main entrance for a peek into **THE ART ROOM**, **POINT 5**.





#### 5 THE ART ROOM

In 1896, the library's committee on buildings and grounds decided to convert an old storeroom above the front entrance into a space to house some of the Athenæum's art objects. Today, the **ART ROOM** contains a significant portion of the library's painting collection, as well as large art books.

Peer up through the windows to see several of the room's works of art (you may need to back up slightly). On the far left hangs a copy of a 1848 daguerreotype of **EDGAR ALLAN POE**, and two paintings to the right, you'll find his fiancée, **SARAH HELEN WHITMAN**. You can learn more about this famous couple on the Collections & Authors tour.

Towards the right side, the painting of the young woman with her head in a book is called *THE GIRL READING*, likely a fine copy of the original by **SIR JOSHUA REYNOLDS**, one of the most preeminent 18th-century English painters. This charming portrait was donated to the library in 1863 from the estate of Alpheus Billings. Billings had been living in London where he formed a partnership "not only in business, but in Aesthetics," with Charles Cadman. Apparently the two men had excellent taste, as is noted in the 1863 Annual Report: "the home of these bachelor friends, jointly occupied by them for more than twenty years, became a kind of temple, wherein were gathered costly and expensive productions of genius and skill."

Make your way up either set of mezzanine stairs to **POINT** 6, the small painting in a glass case directly above the Circulation Desk.

Please use caution while on the narrow catwalk and view the painting one or two people at a time.





### 6 THE HOURS

You're standing in front of one of the jewels of the Athenæum's art collection. *THE HOURS*, a watercolor miniature on ivory, was painted in 1801 by renowned Newport artist **EDWARD MALBONE**. The three female figures represent the Greek *horae*, goddesses that personify the orderly passage of time. In 1854, Eliza Patten, the teenage daughter of the Athenæum's Vice-President, ambitiously raised the funds to purchase the painting after overhearing her father despair of affording it for the library. She went door-to-door in Providence with the painting in hand, asking for donations until she raised the \$1,200 needed (a monumental sum if you consider that the entire building cost under \$19,000 16 years prior).

*The Hours* was stolen with several other paintings in 1881, but recovered after the library offered a \$200 reward and hired "a skillful detective" to trace its whereabouts. It was also the popular subject of *tableaux vivants*, or "living pictures," in which people would dress up like famous scenes or works of art.

Now walk towards the alcove on your right and follow the shelf signs to Biography Z. POINT 7 is tucked into a cabinet-lined alcove at the end of biography.

An 1884 tableau vivant created by Amy Dorrance Richmond Taylor as Past, Mary Hepburn Parsons as Present, and Anna Richmond as Future



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#### 🕖 BOOK ARTS

Art adorns the walls and surfaces of the Athenæum, but it is not restricted to paintings and sculptures – you can also find beautiful artworks on the library's shelves. For centuries, artists have used paper, leather, cloth, ink, and even gold to embellish books and showcase their talents.

In this alcove, you'll find a gallery wall that depicts some highlights of **BOOK ARTS** from the Athenæum's Special Collections (L-R):

- 1. The Golden Gift, 1868. Old Juveniles Collection.
- 2. *Sister Anne* by Charles Paul De Kock, 1902. Book Arts Collection.
- 3. *The Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, 1894–1895. Literature Collection.
- 4. French breviary, c. late 15th century. Book Arts Collection.
- 5. Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect by Robert Burns, 1913, and Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect by Robert Burns, 1896. Burns Collection.
- 6. *Histoire de Gil Blas de Santillane* by Alain René Le Sage, 1820. Holder Borden Bowen Collection.

This last title comes from the library's **HOLDER BORDEN BOWEN COLLECTION**. Before the Philbrick Rare Book Room was built in 1978, this collection and other rare books were housed in the locked glass cabinets in this alcove. The Bowen Collection, donated to the library in 1914, contains about 2,000 visually striking volumes rich in folklore, memoirs, 17th and 18th-century travel and exploration, dueling, wine, and card playing.



This concludes the Art & Sculpture self-guided tour. You can continue on to the Collections & Authors tour by making your way to the Main Hall.

*If you would like to learn more about any of the artwork you saw today, visit digital.provath.org.* 

Remember to turn to the <u>last page</u> before you leave, as we have one final piece of Athenœum lore to pass on...

# Collections & Authors

LOCATION Main Level (no stairs required)

> **TIME** Approx. 20 minutes

STARTING POINT The Main Hall







#### 1 175,000 BOOKS

This tour will explore the library's circulating and special collections, as well as introduce you to some of our most famous literary visitors.

You are standing in the Athenæum's MAIN HALL. Nearly every surface you see is covered in books. The library now holds about 175,000 volumes, a collection which spans over eight centuries.

Our oldest book is *De Studio Sapientae*, an illuminated medieval manuscript that dates to about 1300. This volume was purchased for the library from the estate of Athenæum member and book collector Joseph J. Cooke (1813-1881) in 1883. The library owns two illuminated manuscripts and eight *incunabula* (early books printed before 1501).

Our newest book is likely being processed right now! The Athenæum is constantly acquiring new titles. You can find our most recent acquisitions on the stand-alone shelves opposite the card catalog.

The library's collection has always been driven by its members' interests. In the 19th century, **COLLECTION STRENGTHS** included travel and exploration, natural history, art and art history, and classic literature. Today, the most popular parts of the collection are fiction, mystery, and children's materials.

Walk to the bust outside of the Visitor Center for POINT 2.

## SENSE AND SENSE AND SENSIBILITY HLUSTRATED BY HIGH TROMSON

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#### 2 FICTION

JUDGE JOHN PITMAN was the Athenæum's first board president, and this marble bust was commissioned by "friends of the Athenæum" in 1853 to recognize his contributions and leadership.

Behind Pitman stretch the library's **FICTION SHELVES**, the most popular circulating area in the collection. It's ironic that Pitman resides here, as he had some strong feelings about "the exaggerated descriptions, the vicious sentiments and the varnished impurities of modern fiction." He strongly encouraged the library to collect instead "all works which may illustrate the truths and exhibit the progress of science."

In spite of such initial reluctance, the Athenæum's membership has embraced popular and classic fiction for generations. So much so, in fact, that the library's rare first editions of novels, purchased at the time of publication for members to check out and now housed in the Rare Book Room, are more often than not in very poor condition. They were literally read to tatters, and many have been rebound in plain library bindings.

Pitman himself wasn't immune from the siren call of fiction, as the circulation records indicate he checked out Sir Walter Scott's Waverly novels and Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*.

Now find the large dictionary open on the shelves surrounding the main staircase and look at the books beneath it for **POINT 3**.





#### 3 THE SCRUPLES SHELF

From 1922-1971, the Athenæum separated from the main circulating collection a selection of books that were deemed "indecent," first in a drawer known as "the sewer," then on their own shelf. This group of titles became known as "THE SCRUPLES." The censorship was possibly a result of Providence blue laws limiting public access to certain titles. The books on display here today are copies of some of the original volumes shelved in this way.

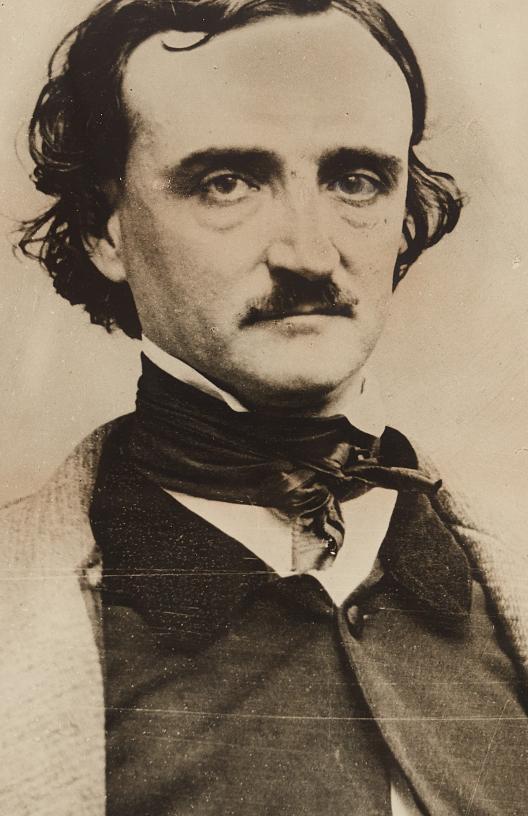
A member recalled being in the library when Brown University professor S. Foster Damon attempted to check out a scruples title:

The customary quiet of the building grew quieter. [Librarian] Miss Mowry sat still. 'Well,' she said. It was a statement. Miss Mowry regarded Foster. Foster regarded Miss Mowry. The clock over the desk ticked. Finally, slowly, the drawer was opened, the book produced and signed out. Exit Foster, beaming and waving goodbye to all with the book in his hand.

When the Board formally ended the practice in 1971 and the books were reintegrated into the main circulating collection, there were two formal complaints. Not that "indecent titles" were inappropriate to shelve in the main stacks, but that it was now very inconvenient that the "best" books were spread all over the library.

Look above the main entrance at the bust of Edgar Allan Poe and through the glass windows above him into the Art Room for POINT 4.

A photograph from a scrapbook in the archives of Athenæum librarians on the front steps, 1926. Miss Mowry is second from the right.





#### 🕘 EDGAR ALLAN POE

The Athenæum has welcomed many famous visitors over the years, including **EDGAR ALLAN POE**, who has a special connection to our library. In the fall of 1848, Poe arrived in Providence to court **SARAH HELEN WHITMAN**, a widowed poet who lived a few blocks away and a frequent visitor to the library.

Through the latticed windows of the Art Room, you can see an 1838 **PORTRAIT OF WHITMAN**, clad in a white dress and bonnet with pink ribbons (she's one painting left of center). Two frames to the left is a **DAGUERREOTYPE PORTRAIT OF POE**, the original of which was taken in Providence in 1848, possibly as an engagement gift for Whitman.

During their courtship, the couple spent time together in the library. On one such visit, Whitman asked Poe about an interesting poem called "Ulalume," recently published anonymously in the *American Whig Review* (December 1847). Poe revealed himself as the author and, as Whitman later recounted, "turning to a bound volume of the *Review* which was in the alcove where we were sitting, he wrote his name at the bottom." Whitman discovered the book still on the shelf years later, and it and its signature remain in the Athenæum's Special Collections.

Now walk to the alcove-side of the card catalog to continue to **POINT 5**.

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Although Sarah Helen Whitman was not a member of the library herself, she frequently borrowed books using the accounts of friends, a common practice at the time. She regularly used the share of Thomas Davis, a wealthy jewelry manufacturer and one-time suitor. Davis went on to marry Paulina Kellogg Wright, a well-known suffragist and abolitionist who became good friends with Whitman.

During Poe's time in Providence, he checked out at least one book that we know of, also using Davis's membership – the first volume of the novel *STANLEY: RECOLLECTIONS OF A MAN OF THE WORLD* by Horace B. Wallace. Poe had corresponded with Wallace, and said about him, "He is an elaborately careful, stiff, and pedantic writer, with much affectation and great talent. Should he devote himself ultimately to letters, he cannot fail of high success."

See if you can look up the card for *Stanley* in the card catalog (you'll be able to find it in two places – under "W" for Wallace and "S" for Stanley). The library still has this exact book in the Special Collections today.

It's possible that Poe used another friend's account to check out more books from the Athenæum, but the circulation records of that membership have been mutilated and signatures sliced out, possibly by autograph hunters.

Step backwards into the alcove behind you for POINT 6.

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#### 🜀 THE BREAKUP

You may be standing in the very spot where Poe and Whitman's romance came to its tragic conclusion.

In spite of significant resistance from her mother and friends, Poe doggedly pursued Whitman, offering her dreams of literary greatness. Overcoming her family's and her own reservations, Whitman finally agreed to marry him on the condition that Poe stop drinking alcohol.

On **DECEMBER 23, 1848**, two days before their planned Christmas Day wedding, the couple was sitting in an Athenæum alcove when a messenger handed her a note. It told her Poe had broken his promise of sobriety and had been drinking both the night before and that morning. Whitman immediately called off the wedding, rushed back to her house, drenched her handkerchief in ether, threw herself on the sofa, and attempted to lose herself in unconsciousness. In spite of Poe's attempts to rouse her, she merely murmured "I love you" before fainting away.

The two would never see each other again, as Poe left Providence that evening and died mysteriously in Baltimore ten months later. Whitman would live for almost 30 more years, spending much of her time at the Athenæum. In spite of their relationship's unhappy conclusion, Whitman continued to advocate for Poe's work both nationally and abroad throughout her life.

Head to the Circulation Desk and then walk right down the corridor into the Arnold Room. Find the alcove labeled the **RHODE ISLAND COLLECTION** for **POINT 7**.





#### 🕖 IN POE'S FOOTSTEPS

This area of the Reference Room is home to the **RHODE ISLAND COLLECTION** which contains materials about the state, its history, and its inhabitants. One famous Rhode Islander represented here is **H.P. LOVECRAFT** - see if you can find *Lovecraft's Providence* by Athenæum member Henry L. P. Beckwith, Jr. on the shelf (call number 917.452 B389).

Greatly influenced by Poe's macabre writing, Lovecraft is recognized as a master of **WEIRD FICTION**, the genre he popularized. He was clearly inspired by Poe's time in Providence: "The hotel where he stopt, the churchyard where he wander'd, the house and garden where he courted his inamorata, the Athenaeum where he us'd to dream and ramble thro' the corridors – all are still with us, and as by a miracle absolutely unchang'd even to the least detail." Lovecraft lived just up College Street from the library and, although he was not a member, would visit the Athenaeum which is mentioned in his work.

Lovecraft's fiction, full of monsters, terror, and the unknown, is inexorably intertwined with his racist, xenophobic, and bigoted views. His personal fear of others and otherness is a central theme of his "cosmic horror," and his work has in turn influenced many writers, filmmakers, and artists including Stephen King, Colson Whitehead, China Miéville, Jordan Peele, Guillermo del Toro, and N.K. Jemisin who continue to engage with and subvert his legacy today (you can find their work on our shelves as well!).

Lovecraft's short story "The Thing on the Doorstep" appears in this copy of Weird Tales: A Magazine of the Bizarre and Unusual, January 1937.

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#### **OTHER FAMOUS VISITORS**

H.P. Lovecraft and Edgar Allan Poe are far from the only famous writers to visit and borrow from the library. The Athenæum archives record visits from transcendentalists **RALPH WALDO EMERSON** and **BRONSON ALCOTT** (father of Louisa May Alcott), writer and social reformer **CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN** (author of *The Yellow Wallpaper*), journalist and women's rights advocate **MARGARET FULLER**, abolitionist and suffragist **PAULINA WRIGHT DAVIS**, and statesman **JOHN HAY**.

Today, authors from across the country are invited to speak at the Athenæum on a regular basis. Recent guests include Ann Patchett, Barbara Kingsolver, Michael Pollan, Colson Whitehead, Geraldine Brooks, David Blight, and Rita Dove.

Step back out into the Arnold Room and find a framed picture of an Egyptian temple and **POINT 8**.

"Strangers Introduced," the Athenæum's 19th-century guestbook. Can you find Emerson's signature from his visit in June 1837?





#### 8 RARE BOOKS

This framed plate is from *DESCRIPTION DE L'ÉGYPTE*, one of the Athenæum's most interesting, rare, valuable, and visually striking books (you might have seen the cabinet created to hold this set on another self-guided tour).

The majority of books now housed in the Philbrick Rare Book Room, like the *Description*, were purchased at the time of their publication for members and visitors to read at the library or check out. It is easy to imagine generations of armchair travelers visiting the Athenæum for a glimpse of ancient Egypt in books they would never have been able to afford themselves.

Along with TRAVEL & EXPLORATION works such as the *Description*, another great subject strength of the Rare Book Collection is NATURAL HISTORY. The framed plate on the alcove to the left of the Egyptian temple is from Albertus Seba's *CABINET OF NATURAL CURIOSITIES*, an 18th-century apothecary's record of his extensive collections. This plate depicts an artistic arrangement of snail shells; many of the plates in this work are presented in similarly artistic fashions.

The Rare Book Room also houses large collections of LITERATURE and FIRST EDITIONS, the works of ROBERT BURNS, the library ARCHIVES and the "OLD JUVENILES," the tongue-in-cheek name for the library's significant collection of early children's literature.



This concludes the Collections & Authors self-guided tour. You can take one of the other tours.

Remember to turn to the <u>last page</u> before you leave, as we have one final piece of Athenœum lore to pass on...

# The Legend of the Fountain



#### COME HITHER...

When you leave the Athenæum, we recommend that you exit by the front doors to sign the guest book and then continue out to the sidewalk in front of the Athenæum on Benefit Street. Here you will find the **RICHMOND FOUNTAIN**.

Donated by Athenæum neighbor Anna Eddy Richmond in 1873, this Gothic Revival granite and marble fountain was designed by the renowned Boston architectural firm of Ware & Van Brunt. It is likely the first public drinking fountain in Providence, and possibly one of the very first constructed in the United States.

Installed at a time when fresh drinking water was scarce, the fountain was at once beautiful and useful. The library's Board prepared a statement "to express to Mrs Richmond their grateful appreciation of the generous liberality which has prompted her to bestow upon the Athenæum this costly and gratifying benefaction, not only for the adornment of these grounds, but also for the refreshment and comfort of the community."

Its curved inscription reads "Come Hither Every One That Thirsteth." A longtime **LEGEND** claims that all those who drink from it are bound to always return to Providence. So whether you are compelled by fate or just enjoyed your visit, we hope you decide to return to the Athenæum soon!