# Classical Rhetoric and the Institutional Fine Arts in Nineteenth-Century Boston

Deborah Stein


Detail of Giovanni Paolo Panini, Modern Rome, 1757, oil on canvas, 67 ¾ x 91 ¾ in., Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City (Credit Line: Gwynne Andrews Fund, 1952), www.metmuseum.org.

On July 4, 1876, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, located in a purpose-built Ruskinian Gothic building in Copley Square, opened its doors for the first time to an enthusiastic public. [1] The day was doubly celebratory as it was also the nation's centennial. Visitors were greeted throughout the Museum by a display of diverse art objects largely borrowed from institutional lenders, most particularly the classically-oriented painting and sculpture collections of the Boston Athenaeum, which had been to that point the city's leading arts organization. In addition to the Athenaeum's collection, there were Renaissance and Baroque engravings as well as collections of Egyptian, Cypriot, and Italian antiquities. Also on view was a collection of eighty-six plaster casts, many of them sourced from European manufacturers, intended to visually represent the history of antique sculpture. [2]

The artworks in the Museum on its opening day reflect, in their inspiration and encyclopedic quality, the centrality of classical rhetoric in Boston's cultural infrastructure. The study of classical rhetoricians and the application of their teachings to both written and oral expression had been viewed by Boston's elite as the route to authority in the city since the Puritans established the Boston Latin School and Harvard College in 1635 and 1636, respectively. [3] When the elites expanded their cultural framework to include the visual arts after two centuries of identifying their city as a center for excellence in clerical exegeses, literature, and oratory, they turned to artistic mediums and stylistic periods deemed most rhetorical. The following discussion traces this journey from the 1807 establishment of the Athenaeum to the 1876 opening of the Museum of Fine Arts.

In the first decade of the nineteenth century, with the religious strictures and political preoccupations of the colonial and revolutionary periods behind them, elite Bostonians had the finances, the leisure time, and, increasingly, the world view to embrace the visual arts beyond portraiture. [4] However, even when persuaded that a

"repository of the arts" was needed, they chose to expand the scope of a recently established literary journal rather than create a stand-alone arts organization. [5] Thus, just as the texts, periodicals, and pamphlets of the reading room could lead to an exemplary life, so too could the art housed in an adjoining room, or so the prevailing wisdom went. "Their tendency is to purify, adorn, and elevate every country where they are cherished," opined one of the advocates for an arts repository. [6] When in 1818 Bostonians took to their bosom as one of their own South Carolina artist Washington Allston (1779-1843), they once again betrayed their bias for fine arts with strong literary associations, as Allston epitomized for them the persona of a romantic poet. [7]

Economic and political circumstances stemming from the War of 1812 prevented the new literary and fine arts organization, renamed the Athenaeum in 1807, from establishing the promised arts repository until the 1820s. [8] The program of acquisitions and exhibitions then launched affirmed the city's taste in art that spoke to erudition, descriptiveness, and persuasion, qualities so valued in the tradition of classical rhetoric. In the realm of paintings, the Old European Masters predominated. With rare exceptions, such as that of Allston cited above, American artists had not yet excelled in history painting. A typical example (albeit of exceptional quality) of art acquired by the Athenaeum in these early years was Giovanni Paolo Panini's eighteenth-century series of four paintings entitled *Monuments of Ancient and Modern Rome*. They showcased Roman classical architecture and the comprehensive collecting and display of classical statuary and thus could be *read* as a virtual lexicon of classical rhetoric. [9]

In the case of sculpture, elite Bostonians were even more insistently classical in their tastes, as reflected in their donations of antique sculptural casts to the Athenaeum as early as 1812. It was not until 1839, however, that these casts were conceived of for a public audience when they were included in the Athenaeum's first exhibition of sculpture. Over one third of the eighty works exhibited were copies of ancient statues, and the remaining two-thirds were portrait busts of leading Americans executed in the classicizing manner of elite Roman portraiture. Before 1839 the casts had been reserved for the use of artists-in-training. [10] Nonetheless, whether for private or public display, sculpture was an art form particularly well suited to Boston's rhetorical bent as its three-dimensionality demanded viewer engagement and its purity of color and line made it the perfect vessel for moralistic persuasion. [11]

To this point in the city's cultural development, the study of ancient languages and classical rhetoric had remained at the core of the Harvard College curriculum. [12] As graduation from Harvard was a *de facto* entrance requirement into Boston's inner sanctum of power, the elites who had emerged since the time of the Puritans had fueled the city's literary leanings. Thus, when in the 1830s two leading scholars at Harvard spoke out in favor of connecting the ancient languages of Greek and Roman to ancient artistic production rather than just drilling students in grammar, it is not surprising that this small but dramatic shift in pedagogy would have a ripple effect on the cultural values of the Boston elite. [13]

Exemplifying this impact was Charles Callahan Perkins, Harvard Class of 1843, who spent close to twenty-five years in Europe and who as both scholar and practitioner embodied the linkage between text and image, or, to put it in language closer to Perkins' heart, between verbal and visual rhetoric. [14] With his expertise and European

cachet he took the cultural community by storm in 1870, when, within less than nine months of his return from Europe, he effected the incorporation of the Museum of Fine Arts, a goal that his fellow elites had yet failed to realize. For the ensuing crucial decade of the Museum's existence, he was intensely involved at a leadership level in virtually every aspect of its operations, particularly with respect to the establishment of education as the Museum's core mission. [15] The Museum's art holdings on opening day described in the first paragraph, linked as they were by the common goal of educating the public through the presentation of a comprehensive view of the history of art, were powerful testimony to Perkins' influence.

Such was the artistic landscape and the view to collection and display at the dawn of Boston's art institutional history. It was a view that was to hold sway until the mid-1880s when, as ever influenced by England's cultural trends, Boston elites began to increasingly value connoisseurship as opposed to didactic content and style. [16] Perkins died in a tragic carriage accident in 1886, leaving Boston without its foremost champion of an educational museum. When in the same year Isabella Stewart Gardner brought home to Boston the first of many original masterpieces of the Italian Renaissance and later periods that were to grace her Italianate mansion on the Fenway, she punctuated this shift. By 1918, it was a *fait-accompli,* as reflected in a Museum of Fine Arts publication of that year. Artistic value, it emphatically declared, belonged to art museums and educational value to science ones. [17]

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**Endnotes:**

[1] The architect for the building was John Hubbard Sturgis (1834-1888) of the firm of Sturgis and Brigham. The building was torn down in the early part of the twentieth century when the Museum moved to its new Beaux-Arts inspired building designed by Guy Lowell on the Fenway.

[2] Hina Hirayama, *"With Éclat," The Boston Athenaeum and the Origin of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston* (Boston: Boston Athenaeum, 2013), 131-135. With respect to this description of opening day holdings as well as a number of other details regarding the fine arts at the Boston Athenaeum, the author is indebted to Dr. Hirayama.

[3] Meyer Reinhold, *Classica Americana: The Greek and Roman Heritage in the United States* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1984), 26.

[4] Religious strictures on the visual arts were primarily those imposed by the Puritans in the seventeenth century. Despite the arrival of Anglican governors who replaced Puritan clerics as colonial leaders the general bias towards art continued through the eighteenth century especially as revolutionary politics began to preoccupy Bostonians in the middle of that century. The exception to this rule was in the case of portraiture, as Puritan doctrine encouraged it as evidence of a life morally lived. Subsequently, Anglican governors modeled it as a status symbol for colonists who fancied themselves English gentlemen. For a full discussion of the colonial artistic climate in Boston, see Jean

Gordon, “The Fine Arts in Boston,” PhD diss., University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1985, 6-10.

[5] The literary journal was the *Monthly Anthology Journal and Boston Review,* the forerunner of the *North American Review*, a preeminent literary journal of nineteenth-century America. Its parent organization, the Anthology Society, was formed in 1803, and within several years it had added a reading room and formal library under its roof. See Richard Wendorf, “Athenaeum Origins,” in *The Boston Athenaeum Bicentennial Essays*, ed. Richard Wendorf (Boston: Boston Athenaeum, 2009), 24-2, and Hirayama, *“With Éclat,”* (17-19) for detailed discussions of the Athenaeum as an outgrowth of the Anthology Society. Regarding concerns for dilution of literary prowess, see the Athenaeum’s prospectus of 1807, excerpted here: “The Reading-Room and Library, being considered leading objects and chief departments of the Athenaeum, it is proposed, as far as can be done without detriment to them, to join to the foundation a MUSEUM or CABINET…a REPOSITORY OF ARTS” (John Lowell, John T. Kirkland, and William S. Shaw, *Memoir of the Boston Athenaeum: With the Act of Incorporation, and Organization of the Institution* (Boston: Munroe & Francis, 1807), 5).

[6] William Tudor, “Institution for the Fine Arts,” *North American Review and Miscellaneous Journal* 2, no. 5 (January 1816): 163. Tudor was one of the founders of the Athenaeum and first editor of the *North American Review.*

[7] He did so not only in his mystical landscapes and dramatic history paintings, but also in his Platonic writings on art and in the long ekphrastic evenings for Boston’s literati that he regularly hosted. See Gordon, “Fine Arts Boston,” 25-29.

[8] In the 1820s capital infusions as well as the donation of real estate came from the prominent Perkins family. The brothers James (1761-1822) and Thomas Handasyd (1764-1854) had accumulated immense wealth in the China Trade, among other mercantile ventures, and were both strong believers in supporting civic, cultural, and educational causes. In 1822 James donated his home on Pearl Street to the Athenaeum in what was then a highly fashionable residential district of Boston. His brother Thomas and son James Jr. both donated substantial sums in a capital drive in the following year. . James died shortly after donating his home and James Jr. did not survive him by many years. Thomas, however, lived until 1854 and during the intervening years his support for the Athenaeum’s fine arts activities continued in this munificent fashion. See Hirayama, “*With Éclat,”* 19-22.

[9] At his patron’s request, Panini painted Cardinal Silvio Valenti Gonzaga in the midst of his collection of pictures, a work that is now in the Wadsworth Athenaeum in Hartford, Connecticut. This painting triggered a commission from Étienne-François de Choiseul-Stainville, the future duc de Choiseul, of two large paintings of *Ancient Rome* and *Modern Rome* along with two other views of modern Rome. These four works comprise the series purchased by the Boston Athenaeum in 1834, three of which were subsequently sold, including the *Modern Rome*, to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Panini received several other commissions for the pendant paintings of *Ancient* and

*Modern Rome* that are now in various international repositories including the Metropolitan Museum of Art. See: "Giovanni Paolo Panini, Modern Rome," accessed November 9, 2014, http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/52.63.2, and Hirayama, *With Éclat*, 180 n. 50.

[10] These included a relief from Herculaneum, the *Laocoön*, the *Dying Gladiator*, the *Apollo Belvedere*, and the *Venus de Medici*. See David Dearinger, "American Neoclassic Sculptors and their Private Patrons," PhD diss., City University of New York, 1993, 51-53, and Rosemary Booth, "A Taste for Sculpture," in *A Climate for Art: The History of the Boston Athenaeum, 1823-1873*, ed. Pamela Hoyle (Boston: Boston Athenaeum, 1980), 24-25. Both sources provide excellent discussions of Boston's nineteenth-century taste for sculpture.

[11] See Jan Seidler, "A Critical Reappraisal of the Career of William Wetmore Story, 1819-1895," PhD diss., Boston University, 1985, 115-117, for a discussion of sculpture's privileged position among the fine arts in America from 1835 to 1865.

[12] I am indebted to Caroline Winterer, "The Classics and Culture in the Transformation of American Higher Education, 1830-1890," PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1996, for fleshing out in detail my understanding of the centrality of the classics to Harvard University's curriculum.

[13] The two scholars were Cornelius Conway Felton (1807-62), the Eliot Professor of Greek Literature, and Edward Tyrell Channing (1790-1856), Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory. See Winterer, "Classics and Culture," chapter 3, and Ronald F. Reid, "The Boylston Professorship of Rhetoric and Oratory, 1806-1904: A Case Study in Changing Concepts of Rhetoric and Pedagogy," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 45, no. 3 (October 1959): 246.

[14] Perkins was author of two highly descriptive and heavily illustrated texts on early Italian Renaissance sculpture, published in 1864 and 1868 in London. His expertise also encompassed the collecting and exhibition practices of the new public art museums recently opened in Europe, such as the South Kensington Museum in London.

[15] For Perkins' pivotal role in bringing about the Museum's incorporation see Hirayama, *"With Éclat,"* 73-76. For his influential role in the Museum's first decade, see Hirayama, *"With Eclat"*; Walter Muir Whitehill, *Museum of Fine Arts: A Centennial History*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), chapters I and II; and Neil Harris, "The Gilded Age Revisited: Boston and the Museum Movement," *American Quarterly* 14, no. 4 (Winter 1962): 545-566.

[16] The reasons for the movement in Britain away from didacticism toward connoisseurship are varied and complex, including the shift in taste toward the High Renaissance, the rise of Aestheticism, and the vast sums of money industrial titans put toward the purchase of original Old Masters. For a sampling of scholarly treatment of

these reasons see, for example, Francis Haskell and Nicholas Penny, *Taste and the Antique: The Lure of Classical Sculpture, 1500-1900* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981); Steven Conn, *Museums and American Intellectual Life, 1876-1926* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); and Hilary Fraser, *The Victorians and Renaissance Italy* (Oxford, England: Blackwell, 1992).

[17] Benjamin Ives Gilman, *Museum Ideals of Purpose and Method* (Boston: Riverside Press, 1918), Part I, Ch. I.