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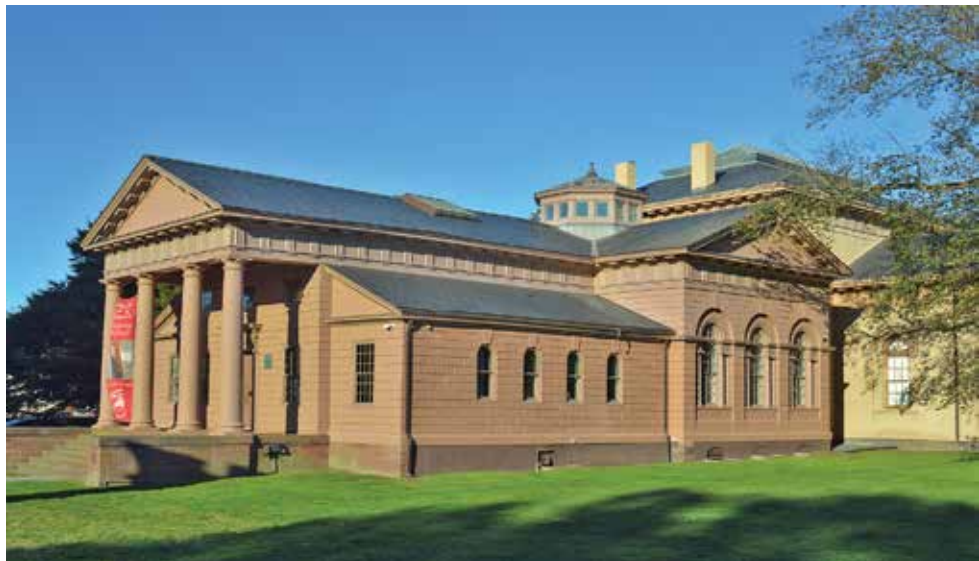
IN NEWPORT, AN ATHENAEUM REMAINS UP-TO-DATE

With McKim, Mead & White's shingle-clad Casino at one end and Doris Duke's Rough Point at the other (plus a run of impressive Gilded Age "cottages" strung between), Bellevue Avenue is perhaps the best-known street in Newport, Rhode Island. A magnet for visitors, Bellevue is also home to one of the city's most unique historical assets: the Redwood Library and Athenaeum. Set back from the sidewalk amid its own broad greensward, its Doric portico seeming inviolable, this 278-year-old institution is not quite as it appears. Founded in 1747 by 46 "proprietors" — engaged citizens determined to "propagate virtue, knowledge and useful learning with nothing in view but the good of mankind" — the Redwood is a membership library, but it has always welcomed the public.

It takes its name from benefactor Abraham Redwood (1709–1788), a Newport-based sugar merchant whose plantation on Antigua ran on slave labor. Redwood, who not only owned slaves but participated in the slave trade, contributed 500 pounds sterling to assemble a "library of all arts and sciences." The collection began with an order of 751 books from London, a purchase that included works on history, mathematics, and theology.

Today, the library's 200,000-volume holdings are particularly strong in early American history and material culture, decorative arts and garden design, 18th-century European illustrated books, and the history of Newport and Rhode Island. Recent key acquisitions include rare Newport almanacs published by James Franklin, Benedetto Pastorini's *New Book of Designs for Girandoles* (1775), and a trove of 17th- and 18th-century architecture books and construction manuals. In addition to accessing material through the library's digital archive, individuals may view actual prints, drawings, and manuscripts not on display by scheduling an appointment.

With a plot of land donated by founding member Henry Collins, architect Peter Harrison (1716–1775) was engaged to design a suitable



The western facade of the Redwood's original building (erected 1747–50) features an impressive Doric portico.

building for the nascent entity. Born in York, England, Harrison arrived in Newport in 1740, where he was involved in the rum trade before returning to England to study architecture. This gifted designer, who ultimately amassed the finest architectural library in the colonies and would later add Newport's Touro Synagogue and Brick Market to his list of achievements (as well as King's Chapel in Boston), drew from the



GILBERT STUART (1755–1828), *Self-Portrait at 24, 1778*, oil on canvas, 20 1/2 x 16 in.



Interior of the original library building

work of the Renaissance master Andrea Palladio to fashion a temple-like structure whose austere harmony and pleasing proportions telegraph a certain gravitas.

A COMPLEX HISTORY

America's first purpose-built library and one of the oldest libraries in the country still operating from its original site, the Redwood has weathered myriad challenges, beginning in 1776, when it was commandeered as a clubroom for British officers. It struggled through the economic vicissitudes of the post-war years (in 1790, the *Newport*



Andrew Raftery has installed his custom block-printed wallpaper in the library's main entrance area.



Herald opined, “Redwood Library is mouldering into a ruin”) and did not begin to see hope for improvement until 1854, when a \$3,000 bequest from former Newport resident Jonah Touro allowed the library to imagine reasserting and amplifying its mission. Significant efforts were made to increase its holdings and committees were formed to aid in its effective running. With its collection growing (bolstered by donations from bibliophiles James Lenox of New York City and John Carter Brown of Providence), the library expanded its footprint with a sympathetic addition designed by Boston architect George Snell in 1858. A second complementary expansion was completed in 1875, designed by Newport architect George Champlin Mason.

While the library was esteemed by the likes of authors Julia Ward Howe, Edith Wharton, and Henry James (all members), it continued to struggle financially well into the early decades of the 20th century. As one-time director Donald B. Fletcher wrote in a collection of essays the library published in 1976, “most of the people who might be inclined to give generously were but for a short time in Newport... another difficulty was the general feeling that the institution was largely endowed.”

Sustaining an ideal is never easy. As the library's current director, Benedict Leca, shares, “I don't think anyone would dispute that when I arrived in 2015, the institution was at a very significant crossroads and facing some serious challenges — diminished funding, spiraling costs, and debt from the restoration completed in 2006. Redress comes with



Andrew Raftery's cherry wood blocks for the Redwood wallpaper in progress.

a clear-eyed look at the cards you hold. And it comes incrementally. Luckily, the Redwood possesses grade-A assets and an unmatched history, including the single most important building of the American Enlightenment, significant historic collections, and an original institutional design perfect for the multi-media world of the 21st century."

That "institutional design" speaks to the Redwood's fundamental mission. Long envisioned as more than just a repository of books, it added "Athenaeum" to its name in 1833 to underscore its commitment to a broad and active intellectual engagement. "Even before then, it was operating as an interdisciplinary 'think space,'" observes Leca, who has served as chief curator of the Art Gallery of Hamilton in Ontario and curator of European art at the Cincinnati Art Museum. "Appending *athenaeum* clearly reaffirmed the 'public humanities' in their widest sense as our stock in trade. It is important for people to understand that the Redwood isn't just books and poetry readings, but also art and exhibitions, that it operates critically in between text and image."

The Redwood's multi-faceted purview was first manifest in the display of paintings, a pursuit in which Newport-born Charles Bird King (1785–1862) played a role. A portraitist who studied with Edward Savage in New York City and

Benjamin West in London, King's subjects included John Quincy Adams, Henry Clay, and Daniel Webster. Perhaps best known for his images of Native Americans, King presented many of his paintings to the Redwood and, in 1859, a monetary gift that allowed the library, as the board announced, "to open to the people a Gallery of Paintings which will undoubtedly... nurture and develop the refined and elevated tastes inseparably connected with the study of art."

Today, the library's collection numbers more than 150 paintings from the 17th century to the present. Primarily portraits, it features work by John Smibert (1688–1751), Robert Feke (c. 1705–c. 1752), and Gilbert Stuart (1755–1828). And while these period treasures are central to the Redwood identity, the library's exhibition program is not pegged narrowly to the past. "We don't just excavate and present history," says Leca, who cites the Redwood

Contemporary Arts Initiative (RCAI) — launched by his wife, Rhode Island School of Design professor Leora Maltz-Leca — as emblematic of the library's approach. "And we don't just 'do contemporary art,'" he adds. "Rather, every project is historically located."

The initial RCAI project, in 2018, was *Remember Bimbia*, an installation by Cameroonian artist Pascale Marthine Tayou (b. 1967). Comprising a towering mound of painted paving stones holding up an American flag, the piece referenced what was once the slave market in the artist's home country and the fact that the Redwood was created with money from the slave trade. The following year, the library welcomed Norwegian artist Per Barclay (b. 1955), whose site-specific *House of Oil and Water* Leca describes as "a rumination on the extractive legacy of colonialism by way of a re-examination of the relationship between architecture and the environment."

NEW DIRECTIONS

The exhibition program is not limited to RCAI's efforts. More traditionally focused shows have included *The Claggetts: Master Clockmakers in Colonial America* and this summer's *Rhode Island Coaches: In the Eye of Thomas Eakins & Contemporaries* (which closes September 7). On view through December 31 is *Andrew Raftery: Redwood Library Custom Block-Printed Wallpaper*. A master engraver and printmaker whose work is included in major museums worldwide, Raftery (b. 1962) employs traditional, labor-intensive techniques in his work, much of which takes the form of transferware ceramics and wallpaper.

Raised in Prince George's County, Maryland, near Washington, D.C., Raftery



In the Redwood's Reading Room (1858) hangs a monumental black Murano glass chandelier commissioned from artist Fred Wilson (b. 1954); in the distance stands a tall case clock created by artist Nari Ward (b. 1963)



The Rovinsky Delivery Room, originally designed in 1875 as Rhode Island's first art gallery

studied painting and printmaking at Boston University. Then, “at Yale,” he explains, “I took Richard Field’s *History of Prints* course and that experience completely transformed my critical understanding of art history. But one fateful event stands out. Dick [Field] had the class over to his house for dinner, which was served on a brown transferware set from the 19th century. He said, ‘These are prints.’”

In 2016, Raftery produced *The Autobiography of an Idea*, a series of transferware plates depicting the artist at work in a garden. When it came time to display them publicly, he recalls, “I knew I had to do something to alleviate the stark white cube of the gallery.” He made a letterpress wallpaper as a backdrop for the plates. Taken with this process, he realized that wallpaper “had so much to offer me as a printmaker.”

For his installation just inside the Redwood’s main entrance, Raftery has drawn from the rusticated wood cladding of Peter Harrison’s 1747 building for his primary motif. “These forms are depicted in low relief,” he says, “ornamented with the distinctive shell carving found on Newport furniture from the 18th century, foliate designs from the building’s overdoor, an escutcheon, and a monogram on an open book. Floating in front of the blocks are leaves from a beech tree — a Druidic symbol of wisdom — planted in front of the Redwood in 1839. Shadows connect the leaves to the blocks, but also create a separate illusionistic effect. Although aligned on a vertical axis, the leaf pattern has a scattered, syncopated effect when seen in relation to the rigidly placed blocks.”

Raftery created this pattern employing the “domino” technique, a process popular in 18th-century France, in which designs are carved into small blocks. Initially used to fashion stationery or decorative book covers, the method was later employed for wallpaper made up of many individual



JEAN-ANTOINE HOUDON
(1741–1828), *Benjamin Franklin*, c. 1778, tinted plaster, 19 1/2 x 13 in.

sheets. Raftery spent more than 1,200 hours carving his designs into six 18 x 24 inch cherry wood blocks. The printing was done by Adelphi Paper Hangings in Sharon Springs, New York, specialists in historic wallpaper and the only company in America that works with distemper paint, a water-based product made with chalk or lime and pigment.

“The rhetoric of pattern design and wallpaper attracts me because it is both gentle and insistent,” Raftery notes. “I hope this will function as a welcoming transition for the tourist who might visit the library only once. And for frequent visitors and people who work at the Redwood, I have tried to put enough visual variety into the design so that they can always notice something new as they walk by.”

Combining, as it does, details of the building’s facade and the beech tree outside with elements of the interiors, Raftery sees his project as “an invitation linking the exterior to what is inside.” After all, the Redwood was never meant to be a closed system, but rather an accessible portal, a place, in the words of an early director, “whereunto the curious and impatient inquirer... and the bewildered ignorant might freely repair for discovery and demonstration to the one and true knowledge to the other.” ●

Information: redwoodlibrary.org

THOMAS CONNORS writes regularly on the visual and performing arts. His article on the art of the tableau vivant appeared in the June 2025 issue of *Fine Art Connoisseur*.

JEAN-HONORÉ FRAGONARD (1732–1806), *Italianate Landscape*, 1761, red chalk counterproof drawing on paper from Charles Bird King’s scrapbook, 9 3/8 x 13 1/4 in.