



HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT

The Boston Athenaeum

At first blush it may seem like one of New England's most private and closed-off cultural institutions, but the Boston Athenaeum has a surprising little secret. Though even many locals think of its fortified-looking neoclassical palazzo as a fully members-only enclave, in fact, any budding bibliophile or art aficionado can access its barrel-vaulted book halls, catacomb-like card catalogs and light-filled art galleries. All it takes to get past the brass-studded red-leather-upholstered front doors? The purchase of a day-pass membership for the enticingly wallet-friendly price of \$40. One can also book a top-to-bottom docent-

led architectural tour of the place, for a more guided experience. (Day passes are generally available day-of, while tours book up in advance.)

Founded some 220 years ago, with early members including President John Adams and authors Nathaniel Hawthorne and Louisa May Alcott, the storied private library sits just off the much-trod city-center tourist path, adjacent to the Boston Common and golden-domed Massachusetts State House. But its 1849 building — which had a \$17m facelift and extension a few years ago — still feels hidden. And as a result, so too do the wonders inside.

Most must-see among the collection of half a million volumes and 100,000-plus maps, manuscripts and bits of ephemera: books from George Washington's private library in Virginia; hundreds of theological texts shipped from England to Boston in 1698 to protect the young minds of the nascent colony from moral corruption; and a pin-cushion whose provenance, perhaps apocryphally, is attributed to one of Martha Washington's gowns.

In the 10,000-piece-strong art holdings, meanwhile,

you'll find paintings by society artist John Singer Sargent, a master of American Impressionism; portraits by Gilbert Stuart, creator of the most famed likeness of George Washington ever made; and works by Allan Rohan Crite, who captured lively scenes depicting 20th-century Black life in Boston. Changing temporary exhibitions reveal more prizes from the collection, plus impressive loans from other institutions.

But as much as it is a museum, like any great library the Athenaeum is also a place simply to rest, relax and recharge your intellectual batteries. And your literal ones, too, if you choose a comfortable lounge chair near an outlet in one of the sunny galleries, reading rooms or book-filled grand halls whose hidden staircases lead to narrow mezzanines full of more fabulous finds. "One of my favorite spots is the fifth floor reading room," says longtime Athenaeum member and top Boston interior designer Nina Farmer. "It's a serene space flooded with natural light and lined with historic portraits — the kind of place that makes you want to linger all afternoon." *Andrew Sessa*