Why is There a Naked Girl on a Horse at the Entrance to Low Rotunda?

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Low Memorial Library is still a serious place for classic architectural references to ancient centers of learning, though it ceased to be the Library of Columbia even before I was born. Imagine how it must have been when it was opened as the Library of the new Morningside campus, just at the end of the nineteenth century. You could not properly even approach its formal entranceway from 116 street between Broadway and Amsterdam Avenue except by climbing many granite steps up to a broad plaza with fountains, and then climbing many, many more steps to the massive doors midway between ten fluted Greek columns. Once you had gained entrance the first thing you would see was a bust of a Greek goddess on another fluted Greek column.

She is still there of course. Her name, Athena, is carved in her right torso as a sort of Classical crib-note. I am sure many of my readers have noticed her many times as they have gone in and out of Low. So imagine my surprise when I learned from my colleague Architecture Professor Andrew Dolkart’s magisterial “Morningside Heights¹” that she is actually a copy of a bust of Minerva, a Roman re-envisioning of Athena who was worshiped throughout the vast Roman Empire. That makes sense here: her bust and her old name invite us to remember that the classic texts of Greek philosophy were incorporated into the Roman course of instruction which then became the underpinning of centuries of Old-World professional education.

The four pillars of that Roman curriculum – Theology, Medicine, Law and Philosophy – each have their own column in the diagonal corners of the octagonal rotunda that lies just beyond the bust. How elegant of Mr. McKim, the architect of Low Library, to give us this subtle reference to what is coming, by showing us Minerva but naming her Athena. Hmm, I thought, if McKim was that clever, maybe there’s more. Let’s have another look.

Sure enough, there’s an even subtler rewrite beneath Minerva’s marble eyes. Ringing her plinth is an octagon of brass bas-reliefs embedded in marble flooring, with mosaics decorating each. I had seen these before and understood them to be the symbols of the zodiac, as I am sure many of my readers have as well. There you
are, I thought: an octagon of zodiacal signs to prepare you for the octagonal layout of the main Reading Room that is now Low Rotunda.

In his great book on the Prophets, A. J. Heschel writes “Our sight is suffused with knowing, instead of feeling painfully the lack of knowing what we see. The principle to be kept in mind is to know what we see rather than to see what we know.” So I asked myself, “what do I see?” rather than knowing what I saw, and I saw a problem: where were the twelve symbols of the zodiac? In every culture that has a zodiac of any sort, there are always twelve constellations, one for each of the lunar months. Here though, there are only eight. So I looked again.

When you look without knowing, as I at last did, you will see that there is a very non-traditional “zodiacal sign” beneath the eyes of Athena/Minerva: a sculpture of a lion with a naked girl on his back. Leo and Virgo in one sculpture is a radical departure from both classical and current notions of the zodiac. It quite wrecks the idea of either Leo and Virgo marking out the procession of the stars in the sky as the Earth follows its orbit around the sun through two successive lunar months.

The game was on. Proceeding clockwise from the south-facing lion and the lady, around the plinth I found a set of scales (Libra); a west-facing scorpion with a centaur firing an arrow (Scorpio and Sagittarius); a lone goat (Capricorn); a north-facing water-carrier on two fish (Aquarius and Pisces); a Ram (Aries); an east-facing bull carrying two children (Gemini and Taurus), and finally, a lone crab (Cancer). What was going on? I am not sure, nor have I found any first-hand notes from the time to tell me. But I do see a wonderful meaning in this octagon of sorts.

Consider that while it is an octagon on its outer edge, within the octagon the symbols jut out at the four points for the compass, where the sculptures are non-canonical combinations of two zodiacal signs. As a result the zodiac is converted not into an octagon, but into the same Greek cross that marks the footprint of Low Library itself. I imagine McKim wishing to convey that just as the Roman educational system built upon the Greek, here in what was intended to be the center of the New World’s intellectual life, our new Library would build upon both Greece and Rome while placing them both in the context of subsequent Christian thought, to complete the plan that Columbia would in time encompass a complete intellectual life.

As a member of the class of 1961, and as the first person in my family to graduate high school and attend college, and later as the Dean of Columbia College, and now as a Biological Sciences professor for 36 years and the Director of University Seminars, I ought not to be unsettled by this century-old game, but I am. It is slightly unnerving to recognize that a century ago my predecessors felt they
could bend even the paths of the stars as the Earth circles the Sun, to fit their hopes and dreams for this place.

Columbia is building a new campus in Manhattanville that will double our size. What would a proper architectural reference be for this campus, that would build on these architectural references but not overreach nature as McKim seems to have done? The first answer that comes to mind, would be a digital display in some new public space that would show the night sky in its totality, and also have the capacity to highlight any of the many constellations various different civilizations have drawn from the patterns they have seen in the stars and galaxies of one or another night sky.

Among the thousands of human cultures and languages there are surely hundreds of named constellations, each with their own stories, and so certainly dozens of zodiacs. Each of these may be different from all the others, because the human mind has and will always see a pattern in what an uncaring nature happens to display. If done right, our new campus north of Morningside would be the place to exemplify the facts that humans are a single species, and that as a species we have an obligation to sustain and preserve the as many as possible of the visions of our fellow humans, and as many as possible of the gifts of nature which have sustained life on this planet until now.