

## ALUMNI CORNER

# Why Is There a Naked Girl on a Lion At the Entrance to Low Rotunda?

BY ROBERT POLLACK '61

**R**eading the Fall 2014 "Location" issue of *Columbia College Today* got me thinking about Low Library, probably the campus' most well-known building. Low Memorial Library, as it is properly called, is a serious place for classic architectural references to ancient centers of learning, though it ceased being Columbia's official library before I was born.

Imagine how it must have been when it was opened, just at the end of the 19th century, as the library of the new Morning-side campus. You could not even approach its formal entranceway from West 116th Street between Broadway and Amsterdam Avenue except by climbing many stone steps to a broad plaza with fountains, and then climbing many more steps to the massive doors midway between 10 fluted Greek columns. Once you gained entrance, the first thing you saw 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 statue as a sort of Classical crib note. I am sure many Columbians have noticed her as they have gone in and out of Low. So imagine my surprise when I learned from *Morningside Heights* — the magisterial book by my colleague Andrew Dolkart GSAPP'77, head of the Historic Preservation Program at the Architecture School — that she is actually a copy of a bust of Minerva, the Roman re-envisioning of Athena, who was worshiped throughout the Roman Empire. That makes sense: 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 Charles Follen McKim, the architect of Low Library, to subtly reference what is coming

by showing us Minerva but naming her Athena. Sure enough, there's an even subtler rewrite beneath Minerva's marble eyes. Around her plinth is an octagon of large brass plaques embedded in marble flooring, with mosaics decorating each plaque. These appear to be symbols of the zodiac. Thus we have an octagon of

zodiacal signs at the entrance that prepares visitors for the octagonal layout of the main Reading Room that is now Low Rotunda.

In his great book *The Prophets*, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel of the Jewish Theological Seminary wrote: "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 let us ask ourselves, what do we see in this octagon? What we actually see in the floor around the goddess is an unexpected answer to the initial problem; that is, where are the rest of the 12 symbols of the zodiac?

What we see is a non-traditional "zodiacal sign" beneath the eyes of Athena/Minerva: a

plaque of a lion with a naked girl on his back. This portrayal of 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 or Virgo marking out the procession of the

stars in the sky as Earth follows its orbit around the sun through two successive lunar months. Proceeding clockwise from the south-facing lion and lady, around the plinth we find 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).

I see a wonderful meaning in this novel octagon of zodiacal plaques.

Consider that within the octagon, the non-canonical combinations of two zodiacal signs

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Low Library art merits a closer look.

PHOTO: EILEEN BARROSO



Robert Pollack '61



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## Alumni Corner

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occupy the four points of the compass. As a result, these doubled signs form the same Greek cross shape that marks the footprint of Low itself. Moreover, there are two linked wreaths in the same floor. 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 in the context of subsequent Christian thought, realizing the plan that Columbia would in time encompass a complete intellectual life.

It is slightly unnerving to recognize that a century ago our predecessors felt they could bend


even the paths of the stars as Earth circles the sun to fit their hopes and dreams for this campus and its role in the world's future. As a member of the Class of 1961 and the first person in my family to graduate from high school and attend college, later the Dean of Columbia College and now a biological sciences professor for 36 years and the director of The University Seminars, I ought not to be unsettled by this century-old act of hubris, but I am.

Columbia is building an additional campus in Manhattanville that will be equal in size to the Morningside campus. What would be a proper architectural reference for this new campus, to build on these existing ones? The first answer that comes to my mind would be a digital display in some public

space on the Manhattanville campus that would show the night sky at any given night of the year and also have the capacity to highlight any of the constellations various civilizations have drawn from the patterns they saw in the stars and galaxies of that night sky.

Among the thousands of human cultures and languages there are surely hundreds of named constellations, each with its own story, and so certainly dozens of zodiacs with 12 symbols each — one symbol for each of the months it takes for Earth to orbit the sun. Each constellation is equally valid and equally abstract, because each is an example of how the human mind has and will always see a pattern in what an uncaring nature happens to display.

Our new campus north of Morningside would be the place to show that this rich diversity of constellations is an example of the astounding and wonderful creativity of

the human mind. It could also be a place from which to take the deep lesson of that fact, which is that as a single species, humans have an obligation to sustain and preserve as many of the visions of our fellow humans as possible and as many as possible of the gifts of nature and of our minds, which have sustained life on this planet until now. 

**Robert Pollack '61** graduated with a B.A. in physics and earned a Ph.D. in biology from Brandeis. He has been a professor of biological sciences at Columbia since 1978, was Dean of Columbia College 1982–89 and in 2010 was elected the fourth director of The University Seminars. He is a recipient of the Alexander Hamilton Medal, has held a Guggenheim Fellowship and is the author of numerous books including his most recent, co-authored with his wife, Amy, *The Course of Nature: A Book of Drawings on Natural Selection and its Consequences*.