Foreword

Like Princeton University, this volume is a rich amalgam of the physical and the intangible; of fact and meaning; of legacy and possibility. It explores what Toni Morrison describes as “the place of the idea and the idea of the place” in the context of Princeton’s institutional portrait collection and the historic chamber, known today as the Faculty Room, in which thirty-three of these paintings hang, while, at the same time, looking far beyond them.

For this is also the story of Nassau Hall, of Princeton as a whole, and of the forces and currents that have shaped our University since it moved to Princeton from Newark in 1756. Indeed, at its most expansive, Inner Sanctum is an exegesis of history itself and the past’s inescapable bearing on the present.

Each contributor to this volume has approached his or her subject from a different angle. For Karl Kusserow, Princeton’s Associate Curator of American Art, the portraits in Nassau Hall are not merely representations of eminent Princetonians; they also constitute a reification of history that “solidified Princeton’s past, constructing it as linear, stable, even dynastic, when in fact it had been punctuated by periods of doubt, inactivity, and decline.” His account of Princeton’s portraits and their immediate environment is therefore as much about institutional self-understanding as it is about the circumstances under which the collection was assembled and displayed.

Historian Sean Wilentz traces the epic evolution of Nassau Hall, Princeton’s most venerable building, from its colonial beginnings through the violence of the Revolutionary War and two disastrous nineteenth-century fires to its present iconic and administrative roles. As he points out, Nassau Hall is more than a stately edifice: “it is a battle-scarred monument to the University’s—and the nation’s—continuities and changes.”

In his thought-provoking essay, Professor of Religion and African American Studies Eddie Glaude speaks for the men and women of color whose portraits have yet to find a place in the Faculty Room, suggesting how the burden of a wounded history can form the basis for regeneration. As he puts it, “We turn to the past... to better equip ourselves to invade the future intelligently, and with love.”

Nobel laureate Toni Morrison invokes the “wisdom of the dead and the energy of the living” to capture the essence of an institution that is both rooted in history and visionary...
enough to transcend it. For her, Princeton’s portrait collection, past, present, and future, documents this “balance of conservation and change, tradition and progress.”

Finally, in a poem entitled “The Inner Sanctum,” Paul Muldoon, the chair of Princeton’s Lewis Center for the Arts, envisions the portraits lining the walls of the Faculty Room not as lifeless artifacts but as a vital force that spurs today’s Princetonians to action in the world beyond our campus.

For all their individuality, the contributions to this volume form an eloquent and incisive whole that reveals how much there is to glean from the historic heart of one of America’s oldest and greatest universities.

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