



# Mia

## Mia Stories



**The scholar/superfan behind Mia's new Jane Austen Reading Room**

In real life, Gina Heath King is like many other Minnesotans, going to Vikings games, talking about the weather, and digging into her graduate studies. But when she enters the fictional world of Jane Austen, she becomes a bit more decorous. She straightens up. Her mind reaches back, and as she tries to explain why Austen's stories remain as popular now as they were 200 years ago she can't help but be reverent.

King is researching Austen at the University of Minnesota, examining her ongoing fame and the context of her achievement—six acclaimed novels written before the age of 41 (most famously *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*, and *Emma*) at a time of very few women authors. She's spent hours in British libraries and Austen's haunts. She's transcribed Austen's correspondence. She's collected rare copies of Austen's books. "It's taken on a life of its own," she says of her research.



Historic copies of Jane Austen's novels—and *Frankenstein*—in Mia's new Jane Austen Reading Room.

Mia has been reanimating its period rooms, an initiative called Living Rooms. It proposed reconfiguring two rooms, the Queen Anne and the Georgian drawing room, into a Jane Austen Reading Room and a celebration of *Emma* around its 200th anniversary. King offered her expertise—and some of her collection, including a first edition set of *Emma* (novels were broken up and sold in series then, which was more affordable for both printers and readers).

The Georgian drawing room is now a kind of *mise-en-scène*, *Emma* interrupted, full of references to the novel: shawls, word games, an unfinished watercolor. The Queen Anne is outfitted with chairs, tables, and shelves full of (non-historic) copies of Austen's books and those of her contemporaries, set out for visitors to sit and read as Austen famously did in one of her brother's gorgeous homes, now known as the Chawton House library.

King has documented the Austen phenomenon in several videos, including a look at the annual JASNA convention (that's the Jane Austen Society of North America). It may be even better than you'd expect: some 800 Austen scholars and fans ("Janeites"), including a couple of bonafide rocket scientists, discussing astronomy in Austen's books, taking dance lessons, shopping at emporiums of gowns and ribbons, and gathering for a final grand Regency Ball. "Amazing," King says. "I can't think of any other word."

King, of course, isn't simply an observer, immune to Austen's charm. "We all still know someone like the characters in these books," she says. "They're so richly drawn, they don't die." ■



## Tim Gihring

Editor, Minneapolis Institute of Art

DECEMBER 16, 2015

[#EMMA](#) [#JANE AUSTEN](#) [#JANE AUSTEN READING ROOM](#) [#LIVING ROOMS](#) [#MIA](#) [#MINNEAPOLIS INSTITUTE OF ART](#)  
[#PERIOD ROOMS](#)

---

Minneapolis Institute of Art  
2400 Third Avenue South  
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55404

(808) MIA-ARTS (642-2787) (Toll Free)  
Tickets: (612) 870-3000 or email [visit@artsmia.org](mailto:visit@artsmia.org)