

[Send to printer](#) [Close window](#)

# Becoming Elizabeth Bennet



THE JANE AUSTEN READING ROOM AT MIA. PHOTOS BY HALLE MASON.

I'm not afraid to admit my obsession with *Pride & Prejudice*. Whether it's the original book, or the Colin Firth five-hour adaptation, the more common Keira Knightley/Matthew Macfayden film, or the recent spin-off *Pride & Prejudice & Zombies*, doesn't every girl dream of dancing in a ballroom with Mr. Darcy?

Imagine my surprise (and inevitable squeal of excitement) when a friend of mine shared a [New York Times](#) article declaring that Mr. Darcy's shirt is coming to America. Unfortunately, Colin Firth's beloved shirt will live in the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, *not* Minnesota. But if you can't justify buying a plane ticket to look at a shirt, I suggest getting your fill of all things Darcy at the Minneapolis Institute of Art's [Jane Austen Reading Room](#)—the Twin Cities' own immersive Austen experience.

Mia restyled the Queen Anne period room as an Austen-themed reading nook, loosely inspired by the library now at Chawton House in England (the house belonging to Austen's older brother, Edward Austen Knight).

The dark paneled walls and cozy fireplace immediately make you want to sit down and snuggle up with Austen's characters. The room offers two bookshelves stocked with any and all books related to Austen. (You better believe it houses a copy of *Sense & Sensibility & Sea Monsters*.) Above the fireplace, two portraits—one of Austen herself drawn by her elder sister Cassandra, the other of her brother Edward—welcome visitors into the space. The room includes a modern reproduction of her traveling writing desk. The original desk is on display at the British Library in London.

The Jane Austen Reading Room allows fans of the 19th century to sample a taste of the era through Austen's world. It's hard to imagine (as I sit lazily typing into my computer) that writers were once forced to painstakingly handwrite with quill against paper. The room guards copies of Austen's letters and tight script.

In celebration of the 200th anniversary of Austen's novel *Emma* (1815), the Georgian drawing room was renovated to recreate a kind of *mise-en-scène*, *Emma* interrupted. Emma is Austen's first and only heroine of independent means, with no immediate desire to marry—thankfully she didn't have a mother like Elizabeth Bennet's, who focused all her time and energy on finding husbands for her five daughters.

The Georgian drawing room overflows with literary references to *Emma*: shawls, word games, and an unfinished watercolor. In a society obsessed with "accomplished" women, the character of Emma was trained in certain feminine arts, such as painting. Austen once wrote, "A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages, to deserve the word." The 19th century certainly comprehended a great deal in the idea of an accomplished woman!

Speaking of such accomplished women, the rooms were put together by the guidance of Gina Heath King, who spends her time researching Austen at the University of Minnesota. King examines Austen's ongoing fame and the context of her achievement—six acclaimed novels written before the age of 41.

I highly recommend taking the time to explore the world of one of the most classic novelists of all time. It's a world brimming with grandeur, civility, and real-life ballrooms. After stepping into Austen's world, be sure to stop by the gift shop and pick up some Austen-themed goodies.

The shop carries Austen's most famous novels and character-inspired tea from Bingley's Teas, based in Minneapolis. I myself was unable to resist purchasing a "Lizzie Bennet's Wit" tea series, a black tea that carries the strength of Elizabeth Bennet with just a hint of cranberries, which represents her quick wit and sharp mind. Every time I finish my tea, it's as if I've finished another of Austen's novels; I'm always left wanting more.



MASON AT THE JANE AUSTEN READING ROOM.

### Related Articles

#### Record Store Day in the Twin Cities

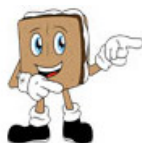
On April 16, record enthusiasts around the globe will celebrate the sounds of needle on vinyl with special events, sales, live music, and more.

#### Laugh Out Loud

LOL all night long at these local comedy clubs and improv shows

#### The Right Here Showcase

Paul Herwig crafts arts landscape for mid-career talent



It's **S'MORE FUN** here  
 Minnesota's Whitefish Chain of Lakes Region

