

## CHARLES WILLSON PEALE AND THE PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM

BY IRWIN RICHMAN\*

THE brush and the pen are both important recorders of the history of man, and so it was probably with a sense of history that a young captain serving during the Revolution, Charles Willson Peale, painted miniature portraits of his fellow officers. These likenesses, repainted to life size, were to become the nucleus of a distinguished American portrait collection and the cornerstone of one of the new nation's pioneer institutions.

After Philadelphia was evacuated in the spring of 1778, Peale, once more a civilian, resumed his career as a portrait painter, and soon many people were visiting his painting room to see his portraits. Indeed the traffic was so heavy that he decided during the summer of 1782 to build, adjoining his house, a gallery in which his growing collection of paintings could be exhibited. And although he considered his collection primarily as his bequest to future generations, he saw that it could also help his immediate future. He could make prints of the portraits or, in the phrase of the times, "History might be painted"; and if his gallery were opened to the general public, his reputation might be enhanced and this in turn might bring him more commissions and more lucrative ones.<sup>1</sup>

Work proceeded on the gallery, and on November 16, 1782, Philadelphia's *Independent Gazetteer* remarked

that Mr. Peale has completed his new exhibition room, which is open for the reception and entertainment of all lovers of the fine arts, being ornamented with the portraits of a great number of worthy personages.

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<sup>1</sup>Charles G. Sellers, *Charles Willson Peale* (Philadelphia, 1947), I, 219.

The gallery at Third and Lombard streets, which was housed in a long narrow building, possessed the distinction of being the first skylighted gallery in America. From the outside, its only distinguishing feature was a long line of overhead windows. Its interior, however, was impressive. The skylights were equipped with screens and curtains, which could be adjusted by lines concealed in the walls, to control the amount of light in the room. On the walls there hung between thirty and forty portraits of "warriors, diplomats, and political-leaders." French heroes were much in evidence, and full-length portraits of Washington and Sieur Gerard dominated the room.<sup>2</sup>

In November of the next year, 1783, Francisco de Miranda, later to become famous as a Latin American revolutionary, visited Peale's Gallery and was much impressed by the portrait collection, which had grown to include about a hundred paintings.<sup>3</sup> Also during this month, we find in the diary of Mrs. Elizabeth Drinker, a middle-class native of Philadelphia, a reference which gives us reason to believe that the new gallery had already become a show place of the Quaker City. In an entry dated November 6, Mrs. Drinker remarked that her family had had some company who had stopped over on their way from New York to South Carolina, and that "Sally and Nancy went with them to several places, Chalkley, also to Simiter, to see Peale's paintings, to view ye Wax Works & c."<sup>4</sup> This might be a good time to mention Eugene du Simitière, the Swiss artist and collector of curiosities. In 1782 he opened in Philadelphia what he called the American Museum. This, however, was more akin to a magpie's nest than to a museum. It was not until Peale opened *his* museum that America got its first scientifically organized museum. When du Simitière died in 1782 his collection was liquidated, and it is not at all improbable that a number of its articles found their way into Peale's Museum.<sup>5</sup>

A turning point in Peale's career came during the summer of

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 220-221.

<sup>3</sup> William S. Robertson, ed., *The Diary of Francisco de Miranda* (New York, 1928), 29-30.

<sup>4</sup> Henry D. Biddle, ed., *Extracts from the Journal of Elizabeth Drinker* (Philadelphia, 1889), 151.

<sup>5</sup> William J. Poets, "Du Simitière, Artist, Antiquary, and Naturalist, Projector of the First American Museum, With Some Extracts from his Notebook," *PMHB*, XIII (1889), 351.

1784, when he was asked to make a set of drawings of a few "mammoth" bones. The drawings were to be sent to Europe to be studied by a German scholar.<sup>6</sup> Peale's brother-in-law, Colonel Nathaniel Ramsay, a veteran of the Revolution, told him that he himself "would have gone 20 miles to behold such a collection," and "Doubtless indeed there are many men like myself who would prefer seeing such articles of curiosity than any painting whatever. It would be little trouble to keep them, and the public would be gratified in the sight, at such times as they came to see paintings."<sup>7</sup>

Peale liked Ramsay's idea, and he decided to establish a museum. He discussed his idea with Robert Patterson, a professor of mathematics at the University of Pennsylvania, and he was subsequently presented with a "Paddle Fish" from the Allegheny River, the first item given to the museum. Peale, however, did not at once devote himself to the establishing of this institution; instead he allowed himself to be sidetracked into becoming an exhibitor of transparent "Moving Pictures," for which purpose he added a skylighted addition to his long gallery in 1784. This undertaking, marked by high production costs and public apathy, was doomed to failure.<sup>8</sup>

From the time Colonel Ramsay suggested the idea of a museum, Peale began collecting specimens. In the summer of 1786, discouraged with the "Moving Picture" business, he decided to concentrate his energies on the project. His museum, unlike du Simitière's, was to be organized along scientific lines. The classification of Linnaeus' *Systema Naturae* was to be followed.<sup>9</sup>

On July 18, 1786, Peale placed an advertisement in the *Pennsylvania Packet* in which he set forth his aims.

Mr. Peale, ever desirous to please and entertain the Public, will make a part of his House a Repository for Natural Curiosities. The Public he hopes will thereby be gratified in the sight of many of the Wonderful Works of Nature which are now closed and but seldom seen. The several Articles will be classed and arranged according to their several species; and for the greater ease to the Curious, on each piece will be inscribed the place from whence it came, and the name of the Donor, unless forbid with such other information as may be necessary.

<sup>6</sup> Sellers, *Peale*, I, 239.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 240-247.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 249.



*Admission ticket to Peale's Museum.  
Courtesy of the American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia*

The date of this advertisement might be taken as the beginning of Peale's Museum. The artist-curator decided to charge an admission fee for the privilege of viewing his collection. This source of income was one of the reasons for the museum's success, and for its ultimate failure. It was responsible for the constant struggle between knowledge and entertainment which raged within the museum. Thus Peale's Museum, the first real museum in America, not only sired other scientific institutions, but also a number of pseudo-museums such as those operated by P. T. Barnum.

During the summer and fall of 1786, Peale worked to develop a successful taxidermy technique. His first attempt at mounting an animal was made upon an Angora cat that Benjamin Franklin had given him. It was a failure; insects ravaged it and many other of his early mountings. He needed to find the right preservatives to use. Finally, after much experimentation he decided upon the use of arsenic for birds and small animals, and mercuric chloride for larger skins.<sup>10</sup> By December of 1780, Peale had his method of preservation so well developed that upon hearing that George Washington had received a gift of Chinese pheasants from

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 253.

Lafayette he wrote to the General "requesting in case of the death of any of them to have them packed in wool and put in any sort of packing case and sent by stage to me. . . ."<sup>11</sup>

Peale was also a pioneer of the art of mounting museum specimens in natural attitudes and surroundings. In a letter he wrote to John Beale Bordley, he described a new display for his museum which contained a

Flock of wild Ducks belonging to this river, ducks and Drakes which I have disposed in various attitudes on artificial ponds. Some Birds and Beasts on Trees and some Birds suspended as flying.<sup>12</sup>

Peale demonstrated the diversity of his collection when he went on to mention that he had heard that a "large stone" had been removed from Bordley's father, and that if it had not been given away yet, he would like to have it. Peale voiced his patriotism when he lamented "that too many rare and valuable things have already been sent and still sending to the other side of the Atlantic."<sup>13</sup>

An undated, unaddressed letter taken from his letter books provides an excellent description of the way in which Peale prepared his mounts.

Directions [*sic*] for preserving Birds etc. Those Birds which are large may be skinned in the following manner. Viz open with a sharp pen knife from the Vent to the breast and separating the skin on each side until the thighs may be drawn through the skin and off at the joint of the leggs, do the same with Wings to the pinion, and in the pinion part of the Wing draw out all the flesh you can get out with the hooked wire here with sent, then draw the neck through the skin until you can cut off the neck close to the Tail, having thus the Skin separated from the Body, hook out all the Brains through the Back part the skull where the neck was cut off out comb of New Mount take off the Eyes by means of the hook from the inside of the mouth, then put some of the

<sup>11</sup> Letter of Dec. (?), 1786, Charles Willson Peale's Letter Book 2, MS in the Peale Papers, American Philosophical Society Library; hereafter cited as L.B.2, L.B.3, etc.

<sup>12</sup> Letter of 5 Dec. 1786, L.B.2.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

powders onto the skull where the brains and Eyes were, all or on all the wings of the Skin, taking care to push as much power [*sic*] as you can get into the pinions by the help of wire. To preserve smaller Birds open only sufficient to hook out the guts & c with a small wire hook and separate [*sic*] the skin from the flesh and the flesh from the breast bone and working the small hook along the [*sic*] by which means the greatest part of flesh of the breast and some from the Wings and nearly all from the thighs may be got out then use the powders freely as more flesh will be left in proportion to the size of the Bird and take cotton mix it with powder and push it by little at a time between the shins and the breast bone and also into the wings and egg [?] as far as it can get by means of the wire.<sup>14</sup>

On January 9, 1787, George Washington acknowledged Peale's letter asking for the pheasants, and he replied that "I am afraid it will not be long before they will compose a part of your Museum, as they all appear to be drooping."<sup>15</sup> Indeed, it was not a long wait until Peale obtained his first pheasant.<sup>16</sup> On February 27, 1787, Peale wrote to Washington thanking him for the bird, and after telling his correspondent that the bird had arrived in good condition, he requested that if any other pheasants died during the warm weather ahead he should "order the Bowels to be taken out" before the birds were to be sent.<sup>17</sup>

During the summer of 1787, when the Constitutional Convention was meeting, Peale gave the last regular exhibition of his "Moving Pictures."<sup>18</sup> The partition between the exhibition room and the gallery was then taken down and one long room of about seventy-five feet in length was created. Peale, however, must have moved the "Moving Pictures" equipment to other rooms in the house, because the Reverend Manasseh Cutler referred to Peale's having it, though he mentioned that it was exhibited only when special arrangements were made. And it was not until January 13, 1791, that Peale first advertised the equipment for sale in *Dunlap's American Daily Advertiser*. The former "Moving Pic-

<sup>14</sup> L.B.2.

<sup>15</sup> John C. Fitzpatrick, ed., *The Writings of George Washington* (Washington, 1932), XXIX, 139-140.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>17</sup> Letter of 27 Feb. 1787, L.B.2.

<sup>18</sup> Sellers, *Peale*, I, 259.

times" room, having a different ceiling height from the rest of the building, was converted into a naturalized setting where Peale displayed various natural history specimens.

Visitors paid one shilling for admission to the museum or one dollar for a year's pass.<sup>19</sup> The Reverend Mr. Cutler, who visited on July 14, 1787, left us a vivid picture of the newly expanded museum.<sup>20</sup> He was impressed and fooled by a lifelike wax figure that Peale had made of himself, and he quite naturally noted that Peale's portrait collection contained "a number of the most distinguished clergymen in the middle and southern states who had in some way or other been active in the revolution."<sup>21</sup> Peale's paintings

were arranged in a most romantic and amusing manner. There was a mound of earth, considerably raised and covered with green turf, from which a number of trees ascended and branched out in different directions. On the declivity of this mound was a small thicket, and just below it an artificial pond; on the other side a number of large and small rocks of different kinds, collected from different parts of the world and represented the rude state in which they are generally found. At the foot of the mound were holes dug and earth thrown up, to show the different kinds of clay, ochre, coal, marl, etc. which he had collected from different parts; also, various ores and minerals. Around the pond was a beach, on which was exhibited an assortment of shells of different kinds, turtles, frogs, toads, lizards, water snakes, etc. In the pond was a collection of fish with their skins stuffed, water fowls, such as the different species of geese, ducks, cranes, herons, etc; all having the appearance of life, for their skins were admirably preserved. On the mound were those birds which commonly walk the ground, as the partridge, quail, heath-hen, etc; also different kinds of wild animals—bear, deer leopard, tiger, wild-cat, fox, raccoon, rabbit, squirrel, etc. In the thicket and among the rocks, landsnakes, rattle snakes of an enormous size, black, glass, striped, and a number of other snakes. The boughs of the trees were loaded with birds, some of almost every species in America, and many exotics.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Sellers, *Peale*, I, 259.

<sup>20</sup> William Parker Cutler and Julia Perkins Cutler, eds., *Life Journals and Correspondence of Rev. Manasseh Cutler, LL.D.* (Cincinnati, 1888), I, 259-262.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 260.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 261.

Later in July, Peale, in a letter he wrote to Ebin Hazard, described his problems as a museum keeper. First among these was that of his finances, which were too unstable to allow him to spend as much time developing his museum as he would have liked. His other problems concerned theft and wear. As a partial cure for these, Peale mentioned that he was having glass cases made for the smaller and more delicate articles in the museum.<sup>23</sup> Further acquisitions were described in a letter Peale wrote in September to George Washington, who had previously visited his museum. Chief among these were "A pair of panthers male and Female of full growth most terrifick [*sic*] animals."<sup>24</sup>

During the years that Peale built up his museum collection, he by no means gave up painting. He continued to make numerous portrait-painting tours through various parts of the country. These trips now, however, had a dual purpose in that they also enabled him to collect specimens for his museum. For example, it was recorded in the *Pennsylvania Packet* of September 15, 1788, that a rattlesnake he had sent from Maryland was on display at the museum. In addition to items gained by his own efforts he received items from other sources. Sea captains especially donated many exotic gifts. A typical list of items which Peale received is to be found in the *Pennsylvania Packet* for August 27, 1788. It lists acquisitions such as:

The horn and part of the tail of an American Horn-Snake. Presented by Miss Araminta Alexander, of Maryland.

An American Pelican, entire, and in good preservation, killed on Chester River, Maryland, and presented by Col. Tilghman.

Two full grown American Panthers, and a porcupine. Presented by Capt. Ferguson.

An albatros from the Cape of Good-Hope one of the largest of the feathered tribe; its wings when extended measure 11 feet.

<sup>23</sup> Letter of 26 July 1787, L.B.2.

<sup>24</sup> Letter of 27 Sept. 1787, L.B.2.

A Jackall and Mangouste [*sic*] both alive from China. The Mangouste is esteemed by naturalists as a great curiosity. The three last were presented by Captain Bell.

Towards the end of the year, on December 11, another listing of items recently acquired by "Mr. Peale's American Museum" (as he now called it) appeared in the *Pennsylvania Packet*. Among the new acquisitions were sixty-three young snakes taken from the stomach of a viper and presented by the Honorable Chevalier D'Anmour, French consul in Maryland, "A tyger cat of South America," and a "Mandarin" pipe and a paddle from "Morris Island" presented by Robert Morris.<sup>25</sup>

Much of 1789 Peale spent in traveling through Maryland. When he returned to Philadelphia in April, he set himself to working in his museum, and the newspaper notices once more started to appear announcing new acquisitions. These included a large tarantula presented to him by a Captain White of Baltimore,<sup>26</sup> a piece of crystal dug from the cellar of a Mr. Raborg, and "A Gringer [*sic*] of the no descript Animal of the Western County, found at the Big Bone Salt Lick, and weighing four pounds."<sup>27</sup> The "no descript animal" mentioned here was probably the mammoth. In November, Peale reported that he had received another of the beast's teeth, and then after listing the various places in which the teeth had been found he stated that this dispersal "is proof that this tremendous animal has formerly taken over many parts of North America."<sup>28</sup>

Peale was well aware of the value of publicity. He especially made use of newspapers. He cultivated the friendship of various editors, he used advertisements, and he wrote letters to the editors. Some of these were anonymous; a letter which appeared in the March 27, 1790, issue of the *Pennsylvania Packet*, stressing the educational value of his museum, was probably written by him. An advertisement that appeared in the same paper on April 26 invited children to visit his establishment and offered the extra inducement of admitting children under ten free, if they were

<sup>25</sup> A vessel, *The Alliance*, which Morris had sent to China, had just returned. Probably these items came from it.

<sup>26</sup> *Pennsylvania Packet*, March 27, 1790.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, August 14, 1789.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, November 3, 1789.

accompanied by their parents. Being a fairly shrewd judge of human nature and a devoted father himself, he probably reasoned that many children would bring their parents. This arrangement did not quite last a year. After 1791 children under twelve had to pay " $\frac{1}{8}$  of a Dollar."<sup>29</sup>

The years 1790-1792 were marked by an influx of curiosities into Peale's collections. Among this polygot lot was a live "Hyena" which a Captain Willit had brought from India; a chip from the coronation chair in Westminster Abbey; the finger of an executed murderer named Broliman;<sup>30</sup> a spur from the roof of Pope's grotto at Twickenham; a chicken with four legs, four wings, one head, and one body; a flamingo; "Pieces of coverlet, Bed curtains and Fringe of Wm. Penn's Bed, formerly at Pennsburg Manor," "a tube of Vitrified Sand, made by a stream of lightning"; an eighty-pound turnip grown in North Carolina; and a live coatimondi.<sup>31</sup>

To further improve his collection, Peale in May, 1791, through the services of his friend the Reverend Mr. Nicholas Collins, undertook to enter into relations with the Royal Academy of Sciences in Stockholm, Sweden, whereby he could exchange specimens of scientific interest with that body.<sup>32</sup> Besides this, Peale entered into business relations with other societies, and also with private individuals. In 1792 he traded specimens with Thomas Hall of London, a man "who had practiced the art of preserving Birds and quadrupeds by the sale of which he maintained his family."<sup>33</sup> Peale thought that Hall's prices were rather high, but he did obtain from this "unequal exchange . . . the Platipus from New Holland."<sup>34</sup>

During August, 1792, Peale added two new "modern Exhibits" to his collection: in the first "that brilliant insect the diamond beetle [*sic*] from the Brazils, is placed in the museum with convenient magnifiers for viewing it to advantage,"<sup>35</sup> and the second

<sup>29</sup> *Dunlap's American Daily Advertiser*, January 13, 1791.

<sup>30</sup> *Pennsylvania Packet*, June 3 and 29, 1790.

<sup>31</sup> *Dunlap's American Daily Advertiser*, February 15, 1791, May 26, 1791, January 23, 1792, and August 28, 1792.

<sup>32</sup> Letter of 11 May 1791, L.B.3.

<sup>33</sup> Charles Willson Peale, "Autobiography," typescript in Peale Papers, American Philosophical Society, p. 203. Hereafter cited as "Autobiography."

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Dunlap's American Daily Advertiser*, August 28, 1792.

was a grotto which Peale had built out of the naturalistic display area which Manasseh Cutler had described.

As his collections grew, Peale realized that it was becoming too large for him and his sons, Raphaelle and Titian, to handle. The need for wider public support was evident, and to obtain it he evolved a plan that would give the museum an institutional character so that it could more effectively appeal for public patronage. On January 19, 1792, Peale had an advertisement printed in *Dunlap's American Daily Advertiser* that was addressed "To the Citizens of the United States of America." After describing his labors on behalf of the Philadelphia Museum (he had recently changed its name), he stated that he would like it to develop into a national institution. He went on to announce that he would like some well known "gentlemen" to become "Inspectors or Visitors of the Museum."

The Board of Visitors that was set up was essentially an advisory group, which meant that Peale retained complete control of the museum as it then existed. Should, however, the nation or the state provide the museum with an endowment, the board would then administer it. But even under these circumstances, Peale would still retain ownership of the museum. The board was to be limited to thirty-six members, and seven were needed to transact ordinary business. They could elect new members, petition for public aid, and approve the sale of part of the museum. Small numbers of Visitors met under the chairmanship of Thomas Jefferson on the 15th of February and on the 5th and 6th of March, but they were not enough to serve Peale's purpose to memorialize the Pennsylvania legislature.

A group with Alexander Hamilton as chairman (Jefferson absented himself) met March 8, 1792, to set up a committee to recommend a plan by which public assistance could be gained for the museum.<sup>36</sup> These meetings were the board's only action. Its members were busy, and the collection was still housed in the private house at Third and Lombard streets. On March 16, 1792, *Dunlap's American Daily Advertiser* printed a list of the names of the Visitors, among whom were Hamilton, Jefferson, James Madison, Robert Morris, Robert Patterson, Casper Wistar, and

<sup>36</sup> Sellers, *Peale*, II, 47-48.

John Beale Bordley. Despite, or perhaps because of, the illustriousness of this assemblage, "Peale lost a great deal of his time in his endeavors to get the society to meet in numbers sufficient to transact any important business," and in the spring of 1794 he gave up his experiment.<sup>37</sup>

The summer of 1793 was for Philadelphia marked by the horrors of a severe yellow fever epidemic, and since during its duration people avoided public places, Peale closed his museum and took his wife and two of his children on a collecting trip to Cape Henlopen and lower Delaware.<sup>38</sup> They stayed there until early September, when they returned to Philadelphia, although the epidemic had not yet died down. The museum remained closed until December 3, and Peale used this enforced vacation to work on improvements to its interior.<sup>39</sup> There were of course also exterior exhibits at the museum. Among the items in its yard and stable were "Eagles, owls, baboons, monkeys, a six-footed cow, &c&c."<sup>40</sup>

In January, 1794, Peale hit upon a new way in which to seek public support. This was through conducting of a drive to gain subscribers for his institution who were willing to buy annual admission tickets at one dollar a piece. A blank book was dedicated to the purpose, and it was inscribed with a flattering preface dated January 10, 1794:

As the Museum is now in a fair way of becoming a permanent and important Institution of rational and instructive Entertainment, The Records of its rise and progress will be valuable Monuments. On these the Names of its generous Promoters claim a place that the Friends of Science may be known to each other and to future admirers [*sic*] of the Creator's Works:

Charles Willson Peale, the present Proprietor, therefore respectfully desires the favor of Subscribers to enter their Names by their respective Signatures, and receive Tickets of Admission for a year from the day of Subscribing.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>37</sup> "Autobiography," 201.

<sup>38</sup> Sellers, *Peale*, II, 42-43.

<sup>39</sup> H. E. Dickson, "Day vs. Jarvis," *PMHB*, LXIII (1939), 179; *Dunlap's American Daily Advertiser*, December 3, 1793.

<sup>40</sup> *National Gazette*, September 4, 1793.

<sup>41</sup> Charles Willson Peale, *et al.*, "Records of Subscription for Tickets in Peale's Museum," 1794-1833, MS in the Peale Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, no page; hereafter cited as "Records."

The first signature in the book was George Washington's.<sup>42</sup> The President's household account book records "pd. C. W. Peale for 4 tickets of admission to his Museum for 1794 subscribed for, by the President. 4 (dollars)."<sup>43</sup> Others who also signed the book included Alexander Hamilton, R. King, Aaron Burr, David Rittenhouse, and William Bradford. During 1794, 421 tickets were sold.<sup>44</sup>

In the March 27, 1794, edition of *Dunlap and Claypoole's American Daily Advertiser* there is another letter which might very well have been written by Peale himself, under the nom de plume of "A lover on Nature." The author (Peale?) begins by stating that "The Legislature will do a very popular act by granting to Mr. Peale the moderate loan he requests" because the museum fostered the growth of science and through its collections brought to light suggestions for new industries. And of course

The moral effect of a Museum is very considerable, I appeal to all who have seen this sublime inscription in that of Mr. Peale, "Ask, the beasts and they shall teach thee and the fowls of the air, and they shall teach thee: and the fishes of the sea declare unto Thee, who knowest not in all these that the hand of the Lord has wrought this? In whose hand is the soul of everything living Thing and the breath of all mankind[.]

Gifts over the years continued to arrive in a helter skelter fashion, and Peale, in an attempt to direct the flood into useful channels, placed a note in the *General Advertiser* of April 26, 1796, calling, among other items, for cubes of various American woods, Indian artifacts, and, as a reflection of his "lover of nature" letter, samples of ingredients used in pottery manufacture. From a careful study of the items received after this advertisement appeared, it can be noted that little attention was paid to it.

As Peale's collections grew, he felt the need for more and more space, and by the early part of 1794, he was contemplating a new building in addition to the existing gallery at Third and Lombard

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> "Washington's Household Account Book, 1793-1797," *PMHB*, XXX, 157.

<sup>44</sup> "Records," no page.

streets.<sup>45</sup> This, however, was at the same time the American Philosophical Society was completing its new hall, and since the society needed only one or two rooms, Peale's friends suggested that he rent the rest of it to house his museum. The curator took this suggestion seriously because he felt that being located among the public buildings around the State House would add prestige to his institution, and also from a more practical standpoint he felt the rent he could collect from his old quarters would cover the expense of the new.<sup>46</sup>

By early June, 1794, Peale had made the necessary arrangements for leasing his new quarters. Besides being the building's principal tenant, he was also to serve as the society's librarian and curator, and to be responsible for the hall's maintenance.<sup>47</sup> The building was to house not only Peale's museum, but his family as well, so before the move could be accomplished he had to make arrangements to convert several rooms into living quarters and to build a kitchen in the basement.<sup>48</sup> The new home of the museum was six blocks from the old, and the move took two weeks. The way in which Peale handled the move proved that he had some of P. T. Barnum in him:

This [removal] in that early period of the Museum was a work of considerable magnitude, as almost the whole of the articles belonging to the Museum must either be carried in hands or on hand barrows. However, to make it easy and at the same time expeditious, he hired men to go with the hand barrows. But to take the advantage of public curiosity, he contrived to make a very considerable parade of the neighborhood, and he began a range of them at the head of which was carried on men's shoulders the American buffalo then followed the panthers, tiger cats and a long string of animals of smaller size carried by the boys. The parade from Lombard to the Hall brought all the inhabitants to their doors and windows to see the cavalcade. It was fine fun for the boys. They were willing to work in such a novel removal, and Peale saved some of the expense of the removal of delicate articles. He was obliged to use every

<sup>45</sup> "Autobiography," 228.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

<sup>47</sup> Sellers, *Peale*, II, 60.

<sup>48</sup> "Autobiography," 219.

means to prevent injury and loss with so numerous a medley, and yet with his care he lost only one article, a young alligator, and had only one glass broke among so many boxes of that kind.<sup>49</sup>

Once settled in the larger quarters of the Philosophical Hall, Peale expanded his inter-museum trading activities by entering into relations with a Mr. Veauvoisin of the "public Museum at Paris."<sup>50</sup> Even with increased interior room, the new quarters, however, were not ideal, and soon after he had made the move, he felt the need for a yard in which to keep living animals; so he petitioned the legislature to grant him a piece of land in the State House yard, and through the good offices of Governor Mifflin he obtained it.

Early in 1795 the Frenchman Moreau de St. Mery was quite impressed when he visited the young institution in its new surroundings:

You cannot expect it to be like the museums of Paris, nor should one insist that Philadelphia must resemble the capital of Europe. But M. Peale, an American, has gathered together there all that his slender resources have allowed, and everything is native to the United States.<sup>51</sup>

The next year, 1796, Peale set out to sell two hundred annual subscription tickets at the advanced price of two dollars each, but he ended up selling only twenty-six.<sup>52</sup> However, it was only the sale of annual tickets which seems to have suffered, for business at the museum seems to have boomed. Later that year, Thomas Jefferson wrote to Peale suggesting that, in order to build up his collections, he enter into a trade relationship with the Prince of Parma, "A young man of letters . . . lately married to the daughter of the K. of Spain."<sup>53</sup> This "young man" is apparently the one who later played so prominent a role in the events which culminated in the Louisiana Purchase.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> Letter of 14 Oct. 1794, L.B.3.

<sup>51</sup> Kenneth Roberts and Anna M. Roberts, eds. and trans., *Moreau de St. Mery's American Journey, 1793-1798* (New York, 1947), 351-352.

<sup>52</sup> "Records," no page.

<sup>53</sup> Horace W. Sellers, ed., "Letters of Thomas Jefferson to Charles Willson Peale, 1796-1825," *PMHB*, XXVIII (1904), 136.

Peale always tried to gain the largest possible audience for his museum, and during January, 1797, he began keeping it open on Tuesday and Saturday evenings, so that people unable to attend during the day might also see the collections.<sup>54</sup> The museum could also promote charities.

In December, 1796, after Savannah, Georgia, had a serious fire, Peale donated the proceeds of his museum for January 4, 1797, to a fund that was being raised to help the fire's victims.<sup>55</sup> This fund-raising scheme provided Peale with much publicity, and the "benefit performance" raised \$144.00.<sup>56</sup>

At the end of April, Peale made his first exchange with Citizen Geoffroy in behalf of the National Museum of Paris. He sent boxes to France, one containing living animals, and the other one, stuffed animals and birds.<sup>57</sup> These transoceanic exchanges were usually unsatisfactory. Often by the time the specimens had arrived at their destination, they were either decomposed or insect-ravaged. For example, in July, 1799, writing to M. Rodrique of Bordeaux, with whom he exchanged specimens, Peale informed his correspondent that the birds he had sent to the museum from France were almost completely eaten up by "Dermest" by the time that they arrived in Philadelphia.<sup>58</sup>

During 1797, Peale made several important acquisitions and improved his display methods. Among the items which entered the Museum were "a Keg intended to have used with those that were employed in the Delaware in the late war, as humourously discribed [sic] by Mr. Francis Hopkinson in *The Song of the Battle of the Kegs*,"<sup>59</sup> and a set of ten wax figures of Indians, Chinese, and natives of the South Seas dressed in their native garb.<sup>60</sup> Peale improved and expanded his displays by installing a number of new glass cases. Several of these were used for the display of smaller quadrupeds, fishes, and shells; those installed in the portrait room were used for Indian, Asian, and African artifacts; and the new large cases in the bird room were used to re-

<sup>54</sup> *Claypoole's American Daily Advertiser*, January 2, 1797.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, January 3, 1797.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, January 6, 1797.

<sup>57</sup> Letter of 30 Apr. 1797, L.B.3.

<sup>58</sup> Letter of 15 July 1799, L.B.3.

<sup>59</sup> *Claypoole's American Daily Advertiser*, 15 July 1797.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 12 Aug. 1797.

place the older, smaller ones and thereby provided for the more effective arrangement of the specimens along Linnaean lines.<sup>61</sup>

By 1800, with his collections rapidly growing, Peale once again felt the need for more room. Since the State House had recently been evacuated, when the legislature had moved out, Peale believed that the time (1800) was now ripe to petition the legislature for the use of the State House itself. In addition to the space he hoped to gain, Peale hoped that by getting the use of a public building, he would also be able to save himself the cost of additional rent.<sup>62</sup> Final permission, however, was not granted until almost two years had elapsed. During the early spring of 1801, Peale heard of the discovery of a "Mammoth Skeleton" on the farm of one Mr. Masten in Ulster County, New York. For years he had been awaiting the discovery of a sizable collection of such relics, so in June he went to New York to buy the bones. After much bargaining, he finally agreed to pay \$200 for the relics already collected, and \$100 for the right to dig up the rest.<sup>63</sup> The story of the evacuation of the skeletons would provide an interesting digression, but since time does not allow let it be enough to say that the bones of several complete animals were removed from the marl pit. The excavation was aided by a loan of some government equipment which Thomas Jefferson made available.<sup>64</sup> For this project also Peale invented the bucket and wheel apparatus, seen in his famous painting, "Exhuming the Mastodon."<sup>65</sup>

In October Peale returned to Philadelphia and began to mount one of the skeletons. The project was carried out in what previously had been the Peale family's parlor. By late December the work was done and the mount was put on exhibition. The skeleton was complete except for the top of its skull, which Peale had made out of *papier-mache*, in the form of an elephant's skull.<sup>66</sup> The cost of seeing the "Mammoth" was not included in the twenty-five cents that it cost to see the museum; this special exhibit cost an extra fifty cents.<sup>67</sup> It proved such a sensation that during the

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 27 Apr. 1797.

<sup>62</sup> Letter of March 3, 1800, L.B.3.

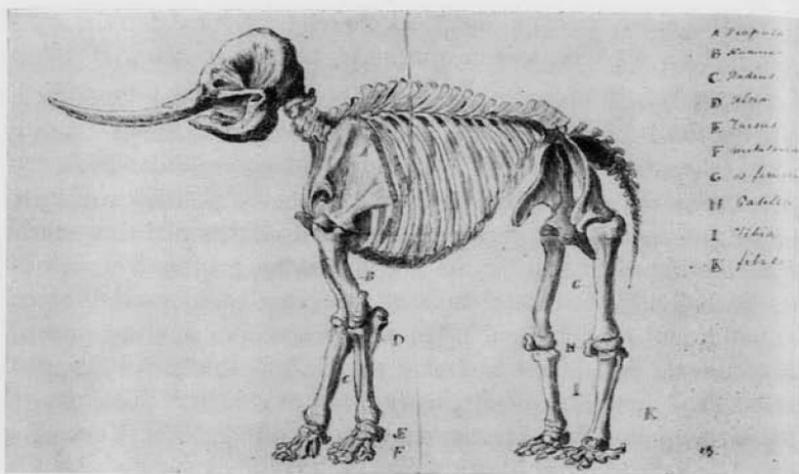
<sup>63</sup> "Autobiography," 281-282.

<sup>64</sup> H. Sellers, ed., "Letters," 137.

<sup>65</sup> Letter of 10 Oct. 1801, L.B.3.

<sup>66</sup> "Autobiography," 341.

<sup>67</sup> *Poulson's American Daily Advertiser*, April 10, 1802.



*Rembrandt Peale's 1801 Reconstruction of the Mastodon.*  
*Courtesy of the American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia*

winter of 1802, Peale, his son Rembrandt, and Mr. Rush mounted a second skeleton, which Rembrandt and Rubens took first to New York City and then to London.<sup>68</sup>

On January 4, 1802, Peale wrote to Thomas Jefferson suggesting that the museum be moved to Washington and there receive a public subsidy, where it could develop, under Peale's ownership of course, into a national institution.<sup>69</sup> Jefferson answered that it was undecided as yet whether or not federal money could be used under the constitution for such a purpose as the support of a museum. The President went on to state that he was planning a university for Virginia, and that "were this established, I should have made your Museum an object of the establishment but the moment is not arrived for proposing this with a hope of success."<sup>70</sup>

In February, 1802, the City Council of Philadelphia petitioned the legislature suggesting that it grant the use of a part of the State House to Peale's museum. Early in March the legislature acted, and it granted Peale the east end of the lower floor, the entire upper floor, and the State House garden. The West Room on the lower floor was to be kept open for use during the general elections. As a sign of his gratitude, Peale gave the members of

<sup>68</sup> "Autobiography," 315-316; "Mr. Rush" is probably James Rush.

<sup>69</sup> Letter of 4 Jan. 1802, L.B.3.

<sup>70</sup> H. Sellers, ed., "Letters," 138.

the legislature free access to the museum.<sup>71</sup> The expansion into the State House was a quiet affair carried on without the fanfare of the earlier move, and Peale retained part of Philosophical Hall for the exhibition of special displays such as the mammoth.

Once settled in the building, Peale set about equipping it. New cases for the birds were built wherein they would be exhibited against either white paper or painted landscapes.<sup>72</sup> And he wrote to his sons in London asking them to buy for him "glass chandeliers," an organ, and a "Plaster Bust of Linneaus which is to ornament, one of my stoves."<sup>73</sup>

The year of the expansion was a prosperous one.<sup>74</sup> One sign of this was that during that year Peale had also installed a John Hawkins' profile-making machine called a Physignotrace in his museum, and during its first year of operation Moses Williams, who was in charge of cutting out the profiles, cut 8,800.<sup>75</sup>

In an 1804 pamphlet entitled the *Guide to the Philadelphia Museum*, we get a good description of the museum as it appeared when it was dispersed between two buildings. The Peales apparently did not at this time use the first floor of the State House for exhibition purposes, except for what was quite literally a shocking exhibition. The lobby of the museum housed a large "Electrical apparatus capable of giving people a 'moderate shock.'" From the lobby one proceeded up to the second floor which was (and is) divided into three rooms. In 1804 they were designated as the Quadruped, Marine, and Long rooms. The forty-foot-long Quadruped Room contained 190 animals mounted in natural attitudes. The larger ones were placed on pedestals protected by iron netting, and the smaller ones were in glass cases. The Linnaean classification system was followed, and the animals' names were given in Latin, English, and French. Included among them were the sloth, the ant eater, and the "Indian Musk." The Marine Room's star attraction, which was displayed on a pedestal in the middle of the room, was the "Chama," a shell three feet long and weighing 185 pounds. The room also contained mounted fish and amphibians, snake skins, and dioramas. The 100-foot Long Room,

<sup>71</sup> Letter of 11 Mar. 1802, L.B.3.

<sup>72</sup> "Autobiography," 318.

<sup>73</sup> Letter of 31 Nov. 1802, L.B.3.

<sup>74</sup> "Records," no page.

<sup>75</sup> "Autobiography," 139.

which stretches the whole length of the State House, housed the collections of some 760 species of birds and 4,000 insects and minerals. The room's twelve-foot ceilings allowed the hanging of two rows of portraits, seventy in number. Of the subjects portrayed, forty were dead (by 1804). This room also housed an organ which any visitor was free to play and the Physignotracc.

The rest of the museum was housed in three rooms in Philosophical Hall. The Mammoth Room contained, besides its huge stellar exhibit, skeletons of the mouse and various other animals. The Model Room contained Peale's wax figures, 1,400 casts of antique gems, a few paintings, and several models of "useful machinery," and the Antique Room housed a collection of casts of antique statues (such as the Apollo of Belvedere) which belonged to a Mr. Smith of South Carolina, who had lent them to Peale until they would become a part of an "American Academy of Finer Arts."<sup>76</sup> Many other items also were exhibited in the museum through loans, but not all of these were as exalted as the classic statues.

For the last five years of his active association with it, Peale has left an excellent and complete listing of the museum's acquisitions. These included several live animals and birds, of which the scarlet ibis and a jaguar were the most unusual, various ore samples from Pennsylvania, and such oddities as armor from Persia and India, a horn removed from the knee of a Negro woman, a battle axe from the "Sanwich Islands," "A dried preparation of human heart with the arteries and Veins injected," and "A Human Foetus, preserved in Spirits."<sup>77</sup> Also during this period, Peale acquired from Jefferson several of the fauna specimens that Lewis and Clark had brought back.<sup>78</sup> Furthermore, Peale never overlooked sheer entertainment, and in December, 1807, he purchased for \$1,000 "A handsome Organ of eight Stops made by Low in Philadelphia"<sup>79</sup>—a sign of his musical taste and a testament to his financial resources as well.

It was with the secure feeling of financial well-being that

<sup>76</sup> *Guide to the Philadelphia Museum* (Philadelphia, 1804), 1-7.

<sup>77</sup> Charles Willson Peale, *et al.*, "Records and Memoranda of the Philadelphia Museum, 1803-1837," MS in the Peale Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 4, 5, 10, 17, 32; hereafter cited as "Memoranda."

<sup>78</sup> H. Sellers, ed., "Letters," 304.

<sup>79</sup> "Memoranda," 27.

Peale in 1810 turned over the active control of his museum to his son Rubens, and retired to his country place Belfield. He lived there in semi-retirement, acting as the senior director of the museum and as a painter, until his death on February 22, 1826.<sup>80</sup> After Rubens took control of the museum, its character began to change, and the profit motive became increasingly more important as entertainment overshadowed science. After a checkered career, the museum finally became defunct in 1845. Its collections in the ensuing years were largely dispersed or destroyed; the largest segment remaining intact today can be seen in the portrait collection of Independence Hall.<sup>81</sup> So ended the story of a pioneer American institution which in its day, thanks to the scope of its holdings, reflected the variety and the interests of the life and the customs of the new nation, and which was the progenitor of both the pseudo-museums and the fine scientific institutions which have followed it.

<sup>80</sup> Sellers, *Peale*, II, 408.

<sup>81</sup> David H. Wallace, "The Independence National Historical Portraits," mimeographed leaflet available from the Independence National Park, 11.