Essay Exhibit and Book Review:

The Peale Family: Creation of a Legacy 1770-1870, Lillian B. Miller, Editor (New York: Abbeyville Press, 1996, $65.00).
Traveling Exhibit: Philadelphia Museum of Art (November 1996-January 1997); M. H. DeYoung Museum, San Francisco (January-April 1997); Corcoran Gallery, Washington, D. C. (April-July, 1997).

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In her forward to *The Peale Family: Creation of a Legacy, 1770-1870,* Ann Van Devanter Townsend raises the question "how would the academic community refer to this important body of scholarship for years to come?" Townsend is President of The Trust for Museum Exhibitions, a nonprofit organization that sponsored the book and Peale family exhibition at three host museums. As Trust President and initiator of the exhibitions, Townsend may well ponder. Her leading players, Lillian B. Miller, Sidney Hart, and David C. Ward, are not trained art historians. Their crossover from cultural and social history to art history reveals how different the disciplines are and how inapplicable the expertise of the social historian can be. Part of what is lacking in this enterprise of exhibition-cum-text is accountability: to the primacy of the image; to the established methodologies of art history; to the kind of scholarly apparatus that substantiates an attribution. Even where the two disciplines should coalesce, there is a lack of accountability: to the bare bones of historical fact, to the Peale family's primary source material stored in the vault at the American Philosophical Society; to the intellectual property of others and including the work done by those who garnered the footnote information for the now four-volume *The Selected Papers of Charles Willson Peale,* of which Miller is editor. Townsend informs the reader that the editor herself is responsible for this "magnificent presentation." Therefore, let me begin with Miller and cite an instance in each category of failed accountability in the order given above.

The threshold of this book is its cover, carrying a reproduction of the excerpted center portion of Charles Willson Peale's painting of *The Peale Family Group,* with his extended family ranged round a table. On the table is the artist's self-referential allusion, a still life of peeled and unpeeled fruit. About this fruit Miller informs the reader: "The bowl of oranges or lemons on the table—exotic and expensive fruits—describes the family's economic status as prosperous." The museum wall label at the Philadelphia Museum of Art parrots the line. What is the observant viewer to think, shifting the eye from text to image only to spy a still life of commonplace apples and peaches! (For the purpose of later discussion, I shall dub this inability to see what's in a painting the citrus fruit syndrome.) Elsewhere Miller interjects that Peale's artistically inclined children were exposed to the "dazzling collection of European paintings in [their] father's gallery." Here is a new "fact" in the Peale literature and an art historian would footnote a document. Perusal of the first source to detail Peale's own collection of paintings, the Peale Museum's 1813 catalogue, yields no harvest of impressive European paintings, just a preponderance of Peale's paintings and some of other artist-family members. Knowledge of the fundaments of art history eludes Miller as well. She locates the classical landscape formula in the paintings of Poussin and Claude Lorrain, whereas every beginner who takes the survey learns that the credit goes to Annibale Carracci.

Miller also must assume responsibility for the exhibition's (and the book's) misattributions. The portrait of *Alida Livingston Armstrong and Daughter* has nothing to do with Rembrandt Peale. Conversely, the supposed self-portrait of Titian Ramsay Peale II "possibly with the help of Rembrandt"resembles others of the latter's presentation drawings. It is an accomplished drawing due to Rembrandt's exposure to the French academic tradition and far beyond the capabilities of the partially-trained Titian. The portrait of *Margaretta Peale* is not by her father, James, but by her sister Sarah Miriam. On the other hand, two oval still lifes given to Sarah Miriam are highly unlikely candidates for that attribution. Furthermore, because the substantiating documentation—provenance, citation of a signature, or an inscription on the back—is absent throughout, the book's use as a scholarly tool is delimited. The irony is that if this sort of data would secure Miller's attributions, she withholds it even from herself. Finally, the exhibition checklist, another useful tool in the art historian's kit bag, is inexplicably incomplete. Nowhere listed is one very interesting artifact that this reviewer had never seen before, the silhouette of Peale's black slave Moses Williams. Bordering Williams's image is a penciled notation that he cut the silhouettes at the Peale Museum. With no record in the checklist, this silhouette threatens to sink back into oblivion because it is not reproduced in the book.

Numerous errors of historical fact damage Miller's credibility. She writes that Raphaelle was preceded by two siblings who died young when, in reality, four children died in the first nine years of the marriage of Charles and Rachel Brewer Peale. Clearly, the magnitude of the loss would have made a great psychological difference both to the grieving parents and to Raphaelle, the first child to survive. In Miller's profile of Raphaelle's childhood, however, she puts most emphasis on the "anxieties" caused by the Revolutionary War, with its "threats of British reprisal." Her source is a letter by Escol Sellers, in which he tries to explain to a much younger brother why his favorite uncle met a tragic end. Miller interpolates one sentence to read, "it was the Revolution that made him the wreck he was." The letter, written in blunt pencil, is very difficult to decipher and should be read in the original, not from the microfiche. When this is done the sentence becomes, "it was the versatuty [sic] that made him the wreck he was." Presumably the word in question is "versatility," because Escol goes on to cite one of Raphaelle's inventions as an instance of his versatility.

That Raphaelle was too talented to focus on any one vocation may be a naive explanation. But it is far more intelligent than supposing that the Revolutionary War unhinged him for life, while not affecting thousands of other children in the colonies, including Raphaelle's sister Angelica and brother Rembrandt, who also experienced the vicissitudes of war at a formative stage. Escol Sellers, arguably the finest mind the family ever produced, does not deserve to be misunderstood through misquotation. One hopes this misconception will not be perpetuated in the literature.

Of all the lapses in Miller's scholarship, it is her failure to take into account the carefully documented footnotes in *The Selected Papers* that is the most perplexing. For instance, Miller introduces Charles Peale, the Peale family's American progenitor as one who attended "Cambridge University for a short time." Yet on page 4 of Vol. 1 the reader finds "CP's time at Cambridge cannot be verified...CP's name is not listed in John Venn and J.A. Venn, comps., *Alumni Cantabrigienses* (London, 1922)." This information is correct and to date no documentation has surfaced to prove otherwise. Miller next maintains that Peale père was "trapped in an embezzlement scheme." On page 5 the reader finds no reference to entrapment, but rather "CP's crime of forgery was among the capital crimes that had the highest ratio of executions to convictions...CP was indeed fortunate to have remained alive." The tap root of the American family tree was a convicted felon, who in the eighteenth-century turn of phrase carried the "stamp of infamy"; this truth should not be wallpapered over by turning him into a victimized Cantab. Equally questionable is Miller's contention that the Peales in England were "landed gentry." Although Charles Peale hoped to inherit an estate from Dr. Charles Wilson, there is no published record of the extent of the estate in Vol. 1, or anywhere else.

Miller proceeds to elevate the economic status, at least, of Charles's son, Charles Willson, as he began his career in Annapolis. Her proof lies solely in *The Peale Family Group* and her interpretation of citrus fruit as connoting prosperity. Even if the fruits in question were citrus, which they decidedly are not, they are only symbols. In terms of hard currency Charles Willson, by his own admission, went £ 900 in debt by 1775. A footnote in Vol. 1, page 134, deals with this embarrassment by honestly searching for an explanation. The footnote begins, "It is difficult to understand why CWP was in such financial difficulty at this time, unless he was still burdened with debts from his pre-London days or was living beyond his income." By 1775 Peale had left Annapolis on account of his staggering debt, writing to his patron Charles Carroll, Barrister, "I cannot see Annapolis with any peace of mind till I have earnt money anough to be ougt [out] of Debt."

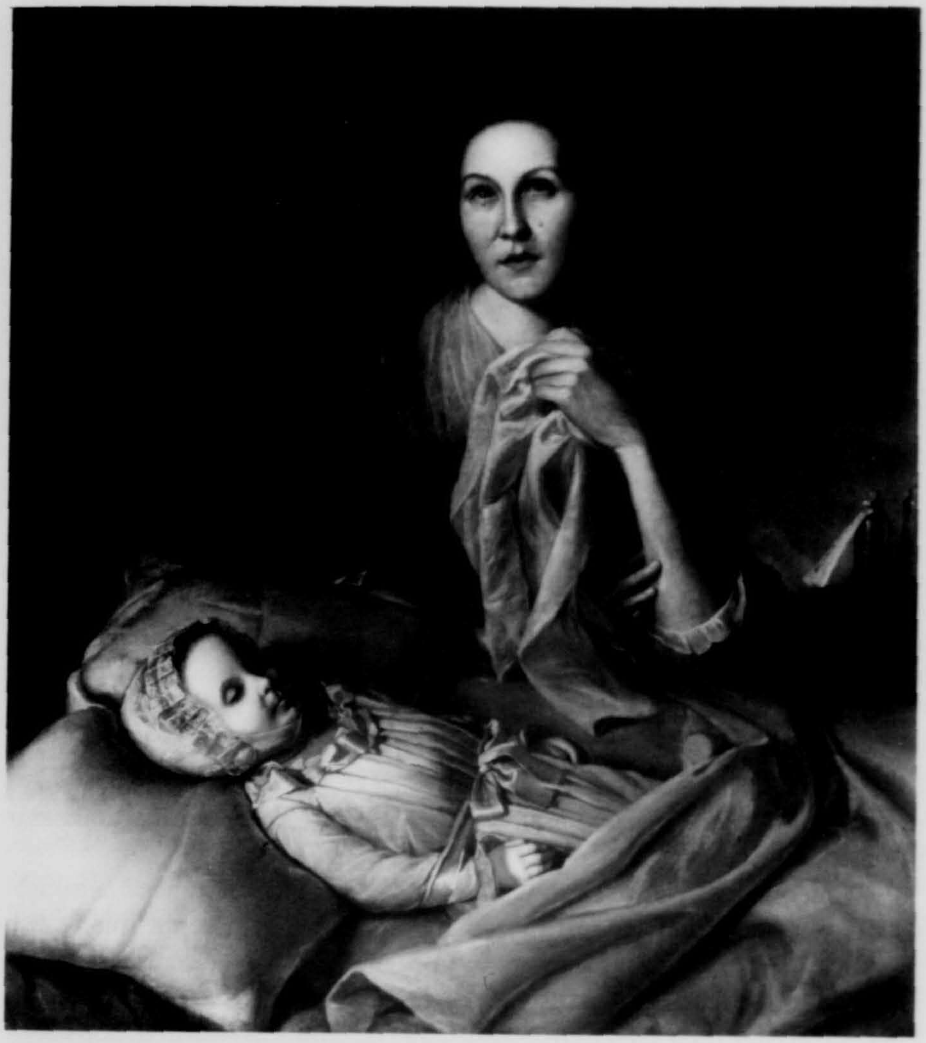
In sum, nothing Miller writes can be taken at face value and her essays consume one third of the book. The irony doubles, for elsewhere she has written that history is based "on fact, on documentary evidence." At this stage of her editorship Miller is not in an enviable position. Early on she staked out her claim to Charles Willson Peale as the son of a gentleman in strained circumstances, a son who would go on to become an exemplary man, a great talent, a deeply loving father. Now the facts, as they tumble out of *The Selected Papers* and are analysed by others, contravene Miller's intellectual territory by introducing complexities and ambiguities.

This dilemma Sidney Hart, the deputy to the editor, understands as he fashions a subtly worked argument to address a problematic aspect of Charles Willson's personality, his parenting. Hart positions Peale between the eighteenth-century patriarchal model and the modern family where deep affection for one's spouse and mourning of a dead child are characteristic. One part of his adduced proof is *Rachel Weeping*, the painting that began as a corpse portrait before the artist father added a join to the canvas to include his tearful wife. With this addition Peale fashioned a painting for public exhibition; and it is appropriate to an age that placed great emphasis on sentiment, according to Hart. Two letters written by Escol Sellers, however, challenge Hart's paradigm. Escol recalls:

> The story as told me by Grandfather [Charles Willson Peale] was that at the time of the childs death, his wife wanted him to paint its likeness and for that purpose brought it into his painting [room] on a pillow as represented she holding the child on her lap for that purpose...she supposed his entire work was devoted to the likeness of the child-she was surprised to find that she was included in the picture-she was not pleased with it and could not be persuaded to sit for him to finish the picture-he said he did work on it a little by stealth.

It is significant that husband and wife express divergent attitudes. Rachel is oblivious to the nicety that an exploitation of her grief and a violation of her privacy will satisfy a requirement of the Age of Sentiment. Either Hart is unaware of these two letters (the second repeats the information) because they remain uncatalogued at the American Philosophical Society, or he represses them because they do not conform to his paradigm. I suspect the former.

Courtesy of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, given by the Barra Foundation.



Charles Willson Peale (1741-1827): Rachel Weeping.

Overall, his essay does ponder the implications of the primary source material.

David Steinberg's essay carries on the work of examining Peale's response to a transition in the social order over the long span of his life. He very convincingly makes a case for the way Peale's ideal of a social construct affected his decisions about composition, symbolism, and even a canon of proportions to signify greatness when portraying George Washington. In the long reach of history, as the paintings can be shown to be more ideated, they become more intriguing. Steinberg is also generous enough to credit the anthropologist Mary

Douglas for her seminal insight that there are culturally specific correlations between conceptions of the human body and social organizations.

After these essays come those about the Peale painting progeny according to birth order. Of Raphaelle, more below. William T. Oedel's treatment of Rembrandt is refreshing in its refusal to do what Rembrandt did so often: puff. He acknowledges Rembrandt's difficulties with an overbearing father and faces the issue of family tensions. Tackling Rembrandt's most ambitious paintings, *The Roman Daughter, The Court of Death,* and the so-called port-hole *Washingtons,* he demonstrates how art which is a great visual disappointment can nevertheless be socially relevant and persuasive in its time.

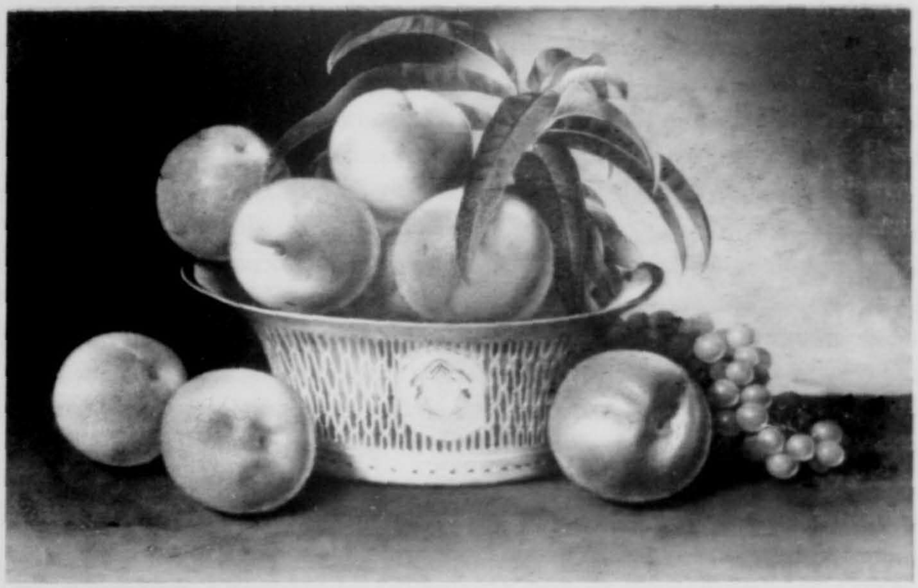
About Rubens's modest talents, Paul D. Schweizer is eminently sensible. And he rightly separates Rubens's still life aesthetic from that of Raphaelle's, observing "it is possible that he found his brother's more austere compositions less interesting pictorially." Rubens's art has been little examined in the scholarly literature and Schweizer presents new and important research.

Kenneth Haltman sees in Titian Ramsay II both the son who most greatly resisted his father and child who ultimately most faithfully embodied the family legacy. His account is thoughtful and convincing. At the same time there are errors in this essay that I find disturbing because previous scholarship by Haltman has been stellar. To instance one faux pas, Haltman states that for Titian's great work of his final years, *The Butterflies of North America,* he executed small studies "in oils." To the right is an illustration of the *Caligo Martia,* described as "gouache on paper." Was Haltman allowed to see galley proof? At the exhibition I perceived in the *Caligo Martia* not the matte finish of gouache, but the gloss of oil.

Numerous small errors throughout mar these essays. Some, like Haltman's make the author seem inattentive. Others, like Oedel's use of the misspelled *clupeus* for *imago clipeata,* make the authors appear to be ignorant of art historical terminology. Such errors raise the question of whether the authors had full control over their manuscripts. Authorial control is an essential consideration if, as Miller maintains, she is launching a "new generation of Peale scholars" on these pages.

Linda Simmons, whose work in the past has made good sense, advances her argument by such fits and starts that I have to conclude she was heavily red-penciled. She sets out to prove that James Peale, the younger brother of Charles Willson, by virtue of his own work comes out from his brother's shadow. As the works are well known, the proof must come out in the prose. Furthermore, Simmon's argument is at odds with the claim of Anne Sue Hirshorn, who maintains that in the composition of still life James followed the lead of his daughter Sarah Miriam. Although Hirshorn's scenario is one-sided and in no way visually convincing, she does undermine Simmons; this suggests that the authors were not allowed to compare texts. David Ward also has a prob-

Courtesy of the Brooklyn Museum: The Polhemus Fund.



Raphaelle Peale, Still Life with Peaches (1821).

lem with authorial control. Already known facts about the Peale Museum are strung together by *non sequiturs* so that the connective tissue of his thought becomes indiscernible. And everywhere the essays seem to suffer from editorial intervention when the editor thinks the author's argument should conform to her own. Does Steinberg actually believe that saddlery, Charles Willson's first profession, was "a trade already relatively high in the hierarchy of manual trades due to its complexity"? Regardless of how low or high the trade, it was still a trade. The operative consideration is whether Peale was the social equal of his high born patrons, and the answer is "no." If so, then the same reasoning would apply to blacksmithery.

Now, let me address Raphaelle Peale's still lifes, about which I know most. For this essay Miller tapped Brandon Brame Fortune, an Americanist who has never worked in the area of still life, much less Raphaelle's. She is, therefore, Miller's appropriate liegewoman. Fortune follows Miller in detecting in the still lifes "the delicate balance between temperance and overindulgence." Because this is her agenda, she derives them from the Dutch Baroque tradition so that she can read into their iconography a moralizing message. Never mind that the strict simplicity and calculated structure of Raphaelle's still lifes set them apart from the turbulent overabundance and spillage of Dutch tabletop still lifes, or that the still life elements are composed on ledges, not tabletops. Never mind that elsewhere in this same book Schweizer's descriptors for Raphaelle's still lifes are the words hermetic, austere, and intense. Of one

Munson-Proctor still life, Fortune writes: "At first we see almost overripe fruit in a dessert basket, accompanied by a decanter of wine...and...celery...imagery we know to represent a dessert, an overindulgence for the lucky few. Add to this picture of a potential repast the related significance of apples associated both biblically and mythologically to choice and its consequences...." I stop here to point out that Fortune is afflicted with citrus fruit syndrome.

The "apples" Fortune interprets so moralistically are one of the oldest variety of quince, the apple-shaped quince. Harvested in October, they can be kept for as long as three months, emitting a sweet aroma as they ripen. Beyond misperception, there are other problems with Fortune's formulation. Celery is not a dessert food. It was, and still is, a table garnish. The term for the container is not "dessert basket," but a reticulated fruit bowl of the twig basket type. The clay strips emulate the withes of the much older Mediterranean wicker-work basket. Open-work porcelain was an eighteenth-century invention that allowed air to circulate around fruit to help preserve it, in an era when a great variety of fruits was available to nearly everyone wherever there was a market system. Furthermore, there is a decanter, but no glass to drink from. Is it possible that it's the vertical prop that the composition requires rather than a reference to overindulgence? What Raphaelle features is a vegetable, celery, which was dug up in the fall and replanted in damp sand or earth-filled barrels, and fruits, the quinces, which were inedible until boiled down with sugar to make marmelo, the first marmalade. Both celery and quince were intractable in their different ways, until knowledge of cultivation or cuisine was applied, but beyond this I forbear interpretation.

When it comes to proof, Fortune is altogether cavalier. She introduces the unfortunate notion that the oranges in Raphaelle's still lifes signify genius. Her source is William Prince's *A Short Treatise on Horticulture* published in New York three years after Raphaelle's death. The wall label for *Still Life with Orange and Book*, c. 1815, lifts this genius symbolism hypothesis from the book and retrojects it a full thirteen years. A discrepancy in chronology isn't the only problem. Prince, a plain-spoken nurseryman from Flushing, wrote his books as practical directives to other horticulturalists. The passage Fortune cites is a quotation within a quotation where the prose waxes purple. Without further elucidation of this author and the original context, the source is pointless. If there is support for this symbolism, there has to be ample proof here and elsewhere, with the bulk of the evidence beginning in the mid-eighteenth century.

Fortune seems not to know caution. She reads into a still life of *Blackberries*, c. 1813, a reference to Christ: "[the blackberries] appear weighty and ready to be pulled from their thorny stem; one cannot dismiss categorically the traditional linkage of their red juice with Christ's Passion." Very simply put, art history does not proceed this way. If, for instance, in a painting by the

Flemish Primitive artist Gerard David, the Christ Child sits in his mother's lap and thoughtfully plucks one grape from the bunch, we can say this is an instance of prolepsis, that even as a toddler he contemplates his Passion and anticipates the Eucharist. The hypothesis is supported by hundreds of other images on panel and in Books of Hours that make the same point, as do contemporary sermons and mystical tracts. Where in America around 1813 are blackberries pictured and referred to in relation to Christ's Passion?

But they are not blackberries at all, rather the *Mysore Ras (Rubus niveus).* This juicy berry came from the southern Indian capital of Mysore. An exotic plant in northern climates, the *Mysore Ras* had to be cultivated in a greenhouse. The cultivation was worth the effort, however, because this *Ras* blooms and fruits continuously. In the painting half the berries are ripe, half ripening, and the branch that extends beyond the saucer heralds forth the ripe, and the unripe. The *Mysore Ras* would have been the crown jewel in someone's greenhouse, and that greenhouse could have been William Hamilton's greenhouse at "Woodlands," then outside Philadelphia. Rich in rare species, "Woodlands" was renowned throughout the young American nation. Plant materials at "Woodlands" were dispersed in 1813, at the time of Hamilton's death. This date jibes with the date for the painting. Raphaelle's is the first illustrated notice of the *Mysore Ras* in the Americas. Thus his painting provided a jolt to avid local botanists during the period of the Agricultural Enlightenment in the region of the Delaware Valley. Raphaelle is one with other family members like Titian Ramsay II in perpetuating the legacy of scientific interest in natural history. Armed with this insight, and precise botanical information, I have no difficulty in dismissing categorically the linkage of the juice of the *Rubus niveus* with the blood of Christ's Passion.

Art history, as introduced to this country by European minds of high caliber, was a learned discipline. In other fields, art historians honor the tradition. Fortune's example says to young minds entering the American field that as a stopgap measure, and in lieu of painstaking research over years, just make a grandiloquent allusion to—say—Christ's Passion.

I proffer one further piece of information. The geranium in Rembrandt's *Rubens Peale with a Geranium* is not an instance of "American plant life." The *Pelagonium inquinans* in the painting is native to South Africa. In 1760 the eminent English botanist and Quaker, Peter Collinson, sent geranium seeds to his botanist friend and fellow Quaker, John Bartram. Escol Sellers writes that John's son, William, and Charles Willson Peale were "intimate" friends. Probably seeds from Bartram were shared with the Peales, hence the occasion for the geranium's proud display.

As to the exhibition, one museum director whom I respect believes that it gives a good overview of the family and the accomplishments of Charles Willson Peale. She added that for the general public "it's icing on the cake." Someone conversant with the Peale literature said, "Why bother? I've seen it all before." I am so immersed in Peale studies that I don't claim to bring a fresh perspective. But I did benefit from scrutinizing the silhouette of Moses Williams and the oil study of the *Caligo Martia.*

Finally, a good word must be put in for Robert L. McNeil, Jr., and the Barra Foundation of which he is President. His steadfast patronage has for many years advanced the study of Philadelphia's cultural life and the art of the Peales. Not the least, it is to the Barra Foundation that we owe the gift of *Rachel Weeping* at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.