

Exhibit Review

Painting in the Grand Manner: The Art of Peter Frederick Rothermel (1812-1895)

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In the fall of 1995 Brandywine River Museum will open a major exhibition of the work of one of America's leading history painters, Peter F. Rothermel. This artist remained true to the tradition of grand manner history painting longer than any other nineteenth-century American painter. Rothermel also occupied a significant place in the Philadelphia art world. An 1884 history of the city declared: "No Philadelphia artist is more widely known than Peter F. Rothermel." Yet, because of declining interest in history painting in the twentieth century, Rothermel's work is not well known today. This exhibition affords the opportunity to look anew at this important artist's work, including his *De Soto Raising the Cross on the Banks of the Mississippi* (1851), *King Lear* (1858), and *The Last Sigh of the Moor* (1864). These and other large pictures in the exhibition, with their dramatic combination of elevated content and romantically idealized style, typify Rothermel's "grand manner."

The son of innkeepers and farmers, Peter F. Rothermel was born in Nescopeck, Luzerne County, Pennsylvania. At about the age of twenty, after working briefly as a surveyor, Rothermel moved to Philadelphia. He became a sign painter and then studied drawing with John Rubens Smith (1775-1849) and painting under Bass Otis (1784-1861). Initially, the young artist specialized in portraiture, but in the early 1840s he turned to history painting, the mode upon which his reputation was to be built.

His first large history painting was *Columbus Before the Queen* (1842). The romantic and dramatic qualities evident in this work characterize nearly all of Rothermel's later historical compositions, whether they derived from world history, literature or the bible. His works began to appear in exhibitions in Philadelphia, New York, and throughout the country. In addition, illustrations by him and reproductions of his paintings were published in popular journals and gift books, including *Godey's Lady's Book*, *Sartain's Union Magazine of Art and Literature*, and *The Opal*.

The 1840s saw Rothermel begin to become a significant part of the Philadelphia art world. Members of the Artists' Fund Society elected him their vice-president in 1844. From 1847 to 1855, Rothermel served as a director of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. That institution named him an Academician in 1860; later he served as President of the Council of Academicians. Rothermel was also instrumental in establishing a curriculum of instruction at the Pennsylvania Academy. In 1864 he was elected President of the Artists' Fund Society and chairman of the Philadelphia artists exhibiting in the Great Central Fair for the United States Sanitary Commission held in Logan Square. He served on the art advisory committee for the Centennial Exhibition.

Among the impressive paintings included in the Brandywine River Museum exhibition is *Patrick Henry in the House of Burgesses of Virginia, Delivering His Celebrated Speech Against*

the Stamp Act (1851). Commissioned by the Art Union of Philadelphia, this painting's intense drama and colorfulness exemplify the best of the artist's style. Art Union members received an engraving of the painting and the opportunity to win the canvas itself. The painting bolstered Rothermel's national reputation, since it was exhibited in Baltimore, Washington, D.C., and Richmond. At this time artists petitioned Congress to commission Rothermel to paint a large historical work for the Capitol.

In 1856, Rothermel traveled to Europe, where he visited London, Genoa, Florence, Venice, Munich, and Dusseldorf. Most of his time was spent, however, in and around Rome. A number of oil sketches executed in Italy appear in the exhibition. Just prior to returning to the United States, Rothermel exhibited three works in the Paris Salon of 1859, where he received an honorable mention.

Several of Rothermel's historical subjects linked the past to the present. For example, his *First Reading of the Declaration of Independence* (1861), which shows a highly diverse crowd bound together by the proclamation of independence, appeared at a moment when the Union was tearing apart. As a reporter wrote in the *New York Times*: "The interest attaching to such a painting, and particularly at such a time as this, cannot be overestimated."¹ Rothermel, who was to be a founding member of the Union League of Philadelphia, surely intended this image to appeal to patriotism, counter sectionalism, and promote unity.

Rothermel's largest and most ambitious painting was *The Battle of Gettysburg—Pickett's Charge*. Commissioned by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania for \$25,000, the huge canvas—sixteen by nearly thirty-two feet—occupied the artist from 1867 to 1870. Discovered to be too big for its site in Harrisburg, the painting went on tour, traveling to Boston, Chicago (where it was damaged during the Great Fire in 1871), and Pittsburgh. In 1876 it appeared, controversially, in the eyes of New York art critics, in the Centennial Exhibition. The canvas was finally installed in Harrisburg in 1894, where it can be seen in the Pennsylvania State Museum today. The large engraving after the painting and oil compositions relating to this important commission are included in the exhibition.

Rothermel spent his later years at his country home, "Grassmere," near Linfield, Montgomery County. His death in 1895 ended a prolific career and signified the passing of grand manner history painting. The paintings, oil sketches, and drawings that this exhibition brings together for the first time in over one hundred years testify to the power, ambition, and beauty of the art of Peter F. Rothermel.

The exhibition will run from September 9 through November 19, 1995 at the Brandywine River Museum in Chadds Ford. An illustrated catalogue detailing Rothermel's art and life accompanies the exhibition.

Notes

1. "Art Gossip," *New York Times*, January 21, 1861, p. 2.