**Rembrandt Peale, “Instigator”**

Late in life, Rembrandt Peale claimed to have “originated” The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. The claim is pompously overreaching, but there is in it a measure of truth, as well as a strange tale of professional-lay relationships in our early art history.

William Dunlap, in 1834, gave the credit for the founding of the Academy to Joseph Hopkinson, to whom, indeed, most of it rightly belongs, and he added that Hopkinson’s zeal was inspired by a view of the casts imported from France in 1803 by the New York Academy.\(^1\) Rembrandt Peale was one of the artists who had contributed an autobiographical statement to Dunlap, but in his case the historian quoted only in fragments, which he interspersed with contradiction and unfriendly comment. We can only assume, since nothing was stated or refuted, that Rembrandt had made no mention then of the Academy’s origin.

It was in 1846, four years after Joseph Hopkinson’s death and forty years after the event, that Rembrandt sent his “inside story” of the Academy’s founding to Charles Edwards Lester, who published it in his *Artists of America*, a compilation similar to Dunlap’s.\(^2\)

Returning to America in 1803, I found sufficient occupation in Savannah, Charleston, New-York, and Philadelphia—there being no capital city in America, as New-York is now becoming; but Philadelphia was the city of promise, and I was zealous in the establishment of an Academy of Fine Arts. A Holland merchant, Mr. Lichleightner [*sic*], arrived with a choice little collection of pictures for sale. I purchased some of him, and we became intimate. He offered to build a Gallery, send me pictures to keep it always full, and to share with him equally in the profits. This I agreed to do, if I could not induce Mr. Joseph Hopkinson to co-operate with me in the plan of an Academy. He repeatedly refused, until I assured him that otherwise I should confine my efforts to my individual interest. His influence raised

---


the money, a building was erected, plaster casts imported, which I mended and mounted: Fulton's and other pictures procured, and the exhibition of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts successfully opened.

Rembrandt Peale's article, "Exhibitions and Academies," in The Crayon of May 9, 1855, touches mostly on Charles Willson Peale's "Columbianum, or American Academy" of 1794, and on his own experiences at the Royal Academy in London. He notes that Joseph Hopkinson had contributed the motto for the Columbianum's exhibition of 1795—"'Tis not in mortals to command success, but we'll do more—deserve it,"—and mentions the Pennsylvania Academy only in a querulous afterthought: "Notwithstanding this, it was the only exhibition until the formation of the Pennsylvania Academy in 1805, of which I was the instigator and chief instrument with the loss of much money and time."

A year later we find Rembrandt restating his claim with succinct finality. On December 31, 1856, he wrote as follows to Robert Coulton Davis, a druggist situated on the southeast corner of Sixteenth and Vine Streets in Philadelphia:

Dear Sir

In regard to the Eagle which decorates the corner of your store, I give you the following particulars.

In the year 1805 I originated the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. My father, C. W. Peale, Wm. Rush and myself first arranged the plan of it. It was agreed that each artist should contribute a specimen of his work, to belong to the Academy—and Mr. Rush expressly carved this Eagle, with various Emblematical accompaniments, which were placed on the Frontispiece of the Academy. After the conflagration which destroyed all but the Front Building, on the renovation of the Academy, the Directors very improperly sold Mr. Rush's Eagle, the gratuitous memorial of his membership & his early interest in the establishment. The Eagle was bought by a Stone Cutter, & ignobly placed over the entrance to his yard, whence it was rescued by your better taste and preserved with a Coat of Gold.

Respectfully yours
Rembrandt Peale

---

3 One of the many lines from Joseph Addison's Cato, popular with Americans during the Revolutionary struggle.

4 The Crayon, I, 290.

5 Original owned by The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.
Aside from its interest as a statement on the Academy and on a hitherto unrecorded work of William Rush, this document offers a nice example of the "certificate" psychology of Rembrandt Peale, that side of his character which Dunlap singled out particularly for derision.\(^6\) For years, Rembrandt had been pressing the merits of his "porthole" portrait of Washington, a posthumous, idealized likeness, by means of statements signed by Washington’s surviving friends. He had become a priest in the cult of Washington-worship and a practitioner of pontification by testimonial. The letter is but one example of how he himself had taken to vesting random and often inaccurate recollections as formal statements. As an authority for the historian, he is as unreliable as it is possible for a completely well-meaning man to be.

It would be natural to suppose that behind the august misstatements of the "venerable Rembrandt Peale... the oldest artist of eminence in America,"\(^7\) there had been an undisciplined and exuberant youth, and so it was. The Rembrandt of the Academy’s founding was as irresponsible as the Rembrandt of the recollections, but far more charming.

He was a handsome boy. He had been spoiled, as all the Peale children had been. We see his father’s conviction that this one of his sons had the truest fire of artistic genius reflected in periods of intensive work, in bursts of soaring enthusiasm, and in the cold agonies of despair and self-doubt. It was for the benefit of the sixteen-year-old Rembrandt that Charles Willson Peale had founded in 1794 the "Columbianum, or American Academy of Painting, Sculpture, Architecture and Engraving," and Rembrandt had been the most earnest and faithful student of its school. It is possible that the founder’s paternal motive may have influenced the withdrawal of the artists who did not approve of an academy with so much scholastic emphasis, and may have weakened the interest of those who remained and took part in the exhibition of 1795.

Certainly, Rembrandt was not ready for the introduction to professional practice which his father gave him by inducing Washington to pose in 1795. After that premature start, he joined his brother

---

\(^6\) Dunlap, II, 187.

\(^7\) The Crayon, I, 91.
Raphaelle in setting up a museum in Baltimore. In 1798, Rembrandt eloped with the daughter of a family servant. In 1800, he turned up again in Philadelphia as the author of two characteristic poems. One, an ode on *The Beauties of Creation*, was set to music for an affair at his father’s museum. The other was published as a pamphlet under the title *Fashion; or, The Art of Making Breeches. An Heroic Satirical Didactic Poem*, and under the pseudonym “Solomon Irony, Esq.” The latter poem is dedicated to the theme, “Life is a pair of Breeches in which mankind are continually fidgeting.” It was inspired, its author states, by finding his wife engaged in making him a pair of “small-cloaths, that is, inexpressibles, indispensibles, leather-organs, or more vulgarly breeches. Indeed I am inclined to consider this Science, of which my Poem is but a Fragment, as the natural auxiliary to Physiognomy; or rather as its first Rudiments, because capable of being read with a less penetrating eye than the favorite science of Lavater.” It was at this same time that the young student of nature and of physiognomy cast aside his surname and advertised himself in the papers as “REMBRANDT, PORTRAIT PAINTER.”

It was Charles Willson Peale’s sensational discovery of two nearly complete skeletons of the American mastodon which brought to Rembrandt a new opportunity to advance himself as an artist. In 1802, one skeleton was opened to public view in Philadelphia, while Rembrandt, who had been an able assistant in the exhumations and reconstruction, sailed for Europe with the other. We may accept most of the account of his stay in London which Rembrandt wrote for Lester and included in his *Crayon* article. He was received with kindly affection by West and enrolled as a student at the Royal Academy. “A trick practiced on Mr. West” brought his expulsion from the Academy, and when, abetted by a group of other students, he hired the Academy’s model and set up a class of his own, his project was defeated “from a mean idea of some of the academicians

9 The identification of the author was made by the late Albert J. Edmunds, cataloger of The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
10 *Fashion; or, The Art of Making Breeches* . . . , 11 (note).
11 Ibid., iv.
12 *The Crayon*, I, 290.
that it was a species of opposition to them.” The narrative becomes somewhat less credible as it continues.

In 1803, when I was preparing to return to America, Mr. West made up his mind to embark with me, which induced me to remark, that although our country was too young adequately to remunerate him for his great historical works, yet by painting them for popular exhibition in our different cities, I thought he might be fully compensated. Mild as was his temper, and pale his complexion, his countenance suddenly became flushed, and he replied—“I will thank you never to name that subject again!” His intention of coming to America was abandoned, by the advice of his physicians, who thought that the delicate health of Mrs. West could not survive the shock of the voyage.

Considering Rembrandt’s earlier behavior, the master’s annoyance seems natural. Distressed by the renewal of war with France, by his unpopularity in England, and by dissensions within the Royal Academy, West may have considered seriously a return to America. Certain it is that Rembrandt brought back such a report to Philadelphia in November, 1803, and that he and his father kept the hope alive.

The next summer saw the Peales in a resurgence from natural history to art. The father, who had hardly touched brush to canvas for six years, was bursting with enthusiasms reborn. He made a studio for Rembrandt in a lower room of Independence Hall, most of which was now occupied by his museum. He sounded out his friends upon the idea of founding a new academy of the fine arts. Their response was enthusiastic. Joseph Hopkinson ventured a guess that he could get enough support from members of the bar alone to carry the project through. Dr. John Redman Coxe was gathering material for a new medical journal in July, 1804, and when the first number appeared in September it carried his own endorsement of the project. That notice, in the “Medical and Philosophical Register” department of the Philadelphia Medical Museum, is our clearest statement of what was happening in 1804.13

The Fine Arts

Mr. Peale is now preparing for the public eye, a number of statues, of the full size, from the antique, such as the Apollo de Belvidere, the fighting and dying Gladiators, the Antinous, &c. We are indebted for these casts to

13 The Philadelphia Medical Museum, I, 90.
the taste and liberality of Mr. Smith,¹⁴ the brother of William Smith, Esq. of Carolina, who deposite them with Mr. Peale, until they become part of an American Academy of the fine arts. To every lover of these it must be extremely gratifying to know, that several of our citizens, noted for taste, are active in the commencement and foundation of such an Academy, which, under peculiarly favourable circumstances, may render Philadelphia the centre of the arts in our western hemisphere. We are informed by Mr. Rembrandt Peale that this is the sentiment of our celebrated countryman Benjamin West, who has expressed an opinion, of the probability of his coming to assist in this laudable plan, ere he ends his days, in his native state.

Within the warm friendship which united them, Charles Willson Peale and Joseph Hopkinson held quite different ideas as to the exact nature of an art academy. Peale had no other conception of it than as a school, holding annual exhibitions of contemporary work and maintaining a permanent exhibition. To Hopkinson, and even more to those whose financial support he was ready to enlist, it would be a society of predominantly lay membership, its purpose the promotion of the fine arts by exhibiting examples of the best sculpture and painting and by offering prizes and other encouragement to artists. Other such societies already existed for the advancement of various cultural or charitable causes. There can be no doubt that Hopkinson was influenced by the new collection of French casts which Robert R. Livingston had obtained for the New York Academy and which had been an exciting public attraction in that city during the preceding winter. It is clear also that he realized that Philadelphia must do more, must obtain not only casts of the same quality but a permanent home of its own. And his confidence that all this could be accomplished so easily must have been based upon Peale’s demonstration, through his now enormously successful museum, that an exhibition, in good taste, could be both an ornament to the town and a self-supporting enterprise. Hopkinson, though greatly interested, deferred to his friend and took no positive action in that summer of 1804.

In December, 1804, the Peales, father and son, journeyed to Washington to paint portraits of the President and other notables. They were riding a bright wave very similar to that which had carried them forward in 1794, culminating again in a portrait that was to introduce the young painter to a wider practice. Rembrandt’s

¹⁴ Joseph Allen Smith.
Jefferson is a far more splendid and mature piece than his Washington of ten years earlier. And Rembrandt, too, had matured—a good-looking young man, witty, bright-eyed, eager and persuasive. He was ready to take a place of leadership in this academy business as they rode back to Philadelphia in February, 1805.

It is here that P. G. Lechleitner, the "Holland merchant," enters the story. His part was a brief one, and it is fleetingly described in Charles Willson Peale's contemporary account of the founding of the Academy. From three of Peale's letters we can draw his own immediate view of the events.

To Raphaelle Peale, June 6, 1805

I will now give you another piece of news, viz: we have again begun an attempt to form an Institution for the advancement of the Fine Arts. You may remember to have heard that Mr. Hopkinson had said, that he could get the lawyers to undertake to make a subscription. A Mr. Lithbrener or some such name (a Hollander who has a collection of fine paintings), called on Rembrandt to speak on the subject. They asked me to meet them one evening and after some conversation we proposed to get a meeting of Mr. [Joseph] Hopkinson, Mr. [William] Rawle, Mr. [Joseph] Sansom, Doctr. [John Redman] Cox[e] and Mr. [William] Meredith. I invited them to my house, we had several meetings, and each aided to obtain subscriptions, but Mr. Hopkinson was the most industrious. We have now 1600$ and expect 2000 will be made up soon, and the subscribers will be called together to form a Constitution. The proposal is to import casts, and begin a gallery of figures and painting beginning with an exhibition—to receive paintings that may be offered for sale, and if sold to take a commission on such sale, thus in the first instance to get some $\frac{3}{4}$% and afterwards 5 or 7 pr. ct. This is the first part of the plan. Out of this will arise the Academy of drawing from models and afterwards from life.

Rembrandt is preparing a general sketch to be considered at our next meeting so that the whole of the business will be ready cut and dryed before the next meeting is called. This you know is a prudent procedure, as large bodies can never do business well. It must always be prepared for them and they will have nothing to do but give their consent and approbation.

To Thomas Jefferson, June 13, 1805

Some gentlemen have met a few times at my house and planned a design of an Academy for the encouragement of the fine arts in this city. A hand-
some subscription is already made by very respectable characters, and we hope soon to begin a building for the reception of casts of statues, also for a display of Paintings, by the exhibition of which a revenue may be had to defray the expense of a keeper, who shall be capable to give instruction to the Pupils. Pictures offered for sale will be exhibited for certain periods, if such are deserving public notice, and when sold, a pr. centum on the sale, to help the funds of the Academy. Out of these funds with what shall be thought reasonable for Pupils to pay for the use of the School—the living Model school will be opened at proper seasons. Mr. West is very anxious to have all his designs, the originals of his historical paintings, placed here, which, my son Rembrandt says, is very valuable. He told Rembrandt that he had long contemplated and indeed had preserved his works for this express purpose, but I believe he thinks our Legislature will make appropriations for an establishment for the encouragement of the Fine Arts, and might be induced to purchase paintings as models of colouring, composition, &c. If he knew the constitutions of our country better he would loose all hopes from that quarter.

To Benjamin H. Latrobe, June 21, 1805

I wish you had been here while an association was forming for the advancement of the fine arts. We have upwards of $2400 subscribed, a constitution formed—President and 12 Directors chosen today, shall probably purchase Bills on tomorrow for the purchase of Plaster figures, which will be sent by a Vessel to sail on Sunday next.

We ought to have a building to put the figures in when they arrive—you know the disadvantage of subjecting them to removals. The Directors by our constitution have the sole management of the funds and directions of the Academy, &c. They are to be elected annually, the only claim the subscribers have on them. I expect that we shall soon make publication of this Institution, therefore I forbear to attempt a further detail.

Here it appears that for all his "general sketch" and "prudent procedure," Rembrandt Peale was by no means controlling the course of events. The idea of buying Lechleitner's paintings (it is not at all impossible that Rembrandt expected a commission from the sale) had been rejected at once. The Academy might exhibit them, and take a commission for itself. The old casts which the Peales had been readying for school use had been rejected as unsuitable for public exhibition, and new ones ordered. Here we seem to have the basis of Rembrandt's "loss of much money and time." 17

The founders of the Academy were proceeding with remarkable dispatch, deliberately avoiding public appeals and any risk of news-

17 Crayon, I, 290.
paper controversy of the sort that had marked the fevered life of the
Columbianum. In July, Dr. Coxe's decorous journal made the "pub-
lication of this institution" of which Peale had written.\(^\text{18}\)

*The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts*

It affords us great pleasure in being able to state, that a plan long since
contemplated, has at length been carried into execution under very favour-
able auspices, viz. the establishment of an academy of the fine arts in the
city of Philadelphia. A liberal subscription has been realized, and directors
have been chosen to carry the design into effect, who have forwarded an
extensive list for casts from the most celebrated statuary, to Paris, whilst
they are now intent on procuring the erection of a handsome building for
their reception, which will do honour to our city, and doubtless aid the
general designs of the institution.

At a meeting of the members of the association for promoting the fine
arts, held in Philadelphia the 21st of June, 1805, the following gentlemen
were chosen officers of the institution.

*President*

George Clymer.

*Directors*

William Tilghman,  
William Rawle,  
John R. Coxe,  
Joseph B. M'Kean,  
John Dorsey,  
William Poyntell,  
Joseph Hopkinson,  
Thomas C. James,  
C. W. Peale,  
Moses Levy,  
William Meredith,  
William Rush.

And at a meeting of the directors, Dr. Glentworth\(^\text{19}\) was chosen treasurer,
and William S. Biddle, secretary.

At the first meeting of the directors,\(^\text{20}\) our much esteemed and celebrated
countryman, Benjamin West, Esq. was unanimously elected an honorary
member of the institution.

On December 26, 1805, the members met again in the Declaration
Chamber of Independence Hall, and signed an application for an act
of incorporation. This parchment document, still preserved in the
archives of the Academy, holds the earliest statement of its aims:

The object of this association is to promote the cultivation of the Fine
Arts, in the United States of America, by introducing correct and elegant
Copies, from works of the first masters in sculpture and painting and by

---

\(^{18}\) Philadelphia Medical Museum, II, 74-75.  
\(^{19}\) Plunkett Fleson Glentworth.  
\(^{20}\) July 1, 1805.
thus facilitating the access to such standards, and also by occasionally con-
ferring moderate but honorable premiums, and otherwise assisting the
studies and exciting the efforts of the artists gradually to unfold, enlighten
and invigorate the talents of our countrymen.

The signatures give one an interesting cross section of the Phila-
delphia citizenry of that day, and stand also as evidence of how well
Joseph Hopkinson had made good his promise of the support of his
fellow lawyers. On May 18, 1870, Horace Binney, then the only
surviving signer of the document, wrote to Caleb Cope21:

I thank you for a sight of the old parchment of december 1805, which has
probably not greeted my eyes since I signed it; but all the circumstances of
its preparation & signature, are as fresh to me as of yesterday. Let the Bar
of this city be praised for at least some good. The initiating movement of
the Academy of the Fine Arts came from the Bar. And I believe the germi-
nating thought—liberally promoted however by some of every profession
& calling. Of the 70 who signed the parchment, 41 were lawyers at that
day—Lewis22 the oldest, W. Tilghman then President of the Common
Pleas, in the next month Chief Justice, the highest in dignity and your
humble servant the humblest and least significant member of the Bar.

This one of its founders, certainly, had no recollection of any
artist having had a part in the Academy's founding. Hopkinson
might have acted in 1804, but seems to have deferred to the founder
of the Columbianum. When the Peales came to him in 1805 with
their proposal on Lechleitner's paintings, he set in motion the events
which followed in such rapid succession, and we find the Peales in
the curious position of believing themselves the leaders of a move-
ment that was actually going its own way.

Charles Willson Peale's letters show that to him an "academy"
was essentially a school. His fellow directors seem to have granted
this point in conversation but to have made it clear that their endow-
ment had been raised implicitly for a building and permanent exhibi-
tion. His letter to Jefferson of June 13 mentions a curriculum, tuition
fees, a curator-professorship. It would be interesting to know by
what authority an artist had actually been appointed to that posi-
tion. The directors held their first meeting on July 1, and on that
day, in a newspaper advertisement regarding the copyright of his

21 Original in The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.
22 William Lewis (1751–1815).
American Drawing Magazine, John Eckstein was announcing himself as “late painter and statuary to the King of Prussia, and now professor of Drawing to the Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia.”

Eckstein was then seventy years of age. He had had experience in the academies of London and Berlin, and had come to America in August, 1794, just in time to join Peale’s Columbianum group. We can guess that Peale had offered him the appointment. We have no evidence as yet as to whether he actually taught a class.

Gradually, in his gentle way, we find Charles Willson Peale assuming a role of dissent in Academy affairs. He would have preferred Latrobe to John Dorsey as architect of the new building. When he saw Dorsey’s plans he predicted that the roof might leak, as, indeed, it was to do. The new building was opened in 1806. There was no room in it for a life class, but Peale remained quietly, persistently hopeful. On December 16, 1807, he wrote to Benjamin West: “It is my intention to urge the Directors of our Academy to make additional Rooms the ensuing summer: one for an exhibition room solely for Pictures & another to draw from the living figure, which I hope we may accomplish by this time twelve months. This institution is growing into favor.”

In 1810, the year of Peale’s retirement from Philadelphia to his country seat, the Columbian Society of Artists was organized, largely in protest against the Academy’s failure to provide current exhibitions or a school. Society and Academy promptly united in establishing the annual exhibitions of contemporary art which have continued to this day. Rembrandt Peale, the Academy’s self-styled “instigator,” had taken his father’s place as a director, and was also a member of the new Columbian Society.

The Pennsylvania Academy had turned out to be something quite different from what the two most active artists among its founders had conceived. The contribution of the Peales is a more profound and significant one than they themselves realized. Their museums and divers other projects linked them unusually intimately to the great American public. Their influence in the early years held the lay-controlled Academy and the profession together and helped to estab-

23 Poulson's American Daily Advertiser, July 1, 1805.
24 C. W. Peale to Raphelle Peale, Sept. 7, 1805, American Philosophical Society.
lish a pattern of co-operative action. The familiar experience would have been the complete breaking away of the artists, thus denying the Academy a support necessary to its existence. Instead, there was brought into being a relationship between public and profession that was to grow continually closer in unity and strength, a relationship that is one essential element of the greatness of The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, and a vital force in the continuing progress of American art.

_Dickinson College_  

CHARLES COLEMAN SELLERS