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Franklin's Last Portrait

THE Historical Society's solid, stolid, splendidly factual portrait of Benjamin Franklin, painted by Charles Willson Peale, appears to have originated in a mistake. That may possibly explain both its nonacceptance by the American Philosophical Society, which had commissioned it, and the very particular pains taken by the artist to give it all in his power—to make it a record of the man and a monument to his life.

The Philosophical Society met at Franklin's home on the evening of July 17, 1789. Fourteen members were present. David Rittenhouse and Dr. John Jones collaborated in presenting to the meeting "a particular account of the effects of a flash of lightning," an event which had occurred on the 7th of June, about six weeks before. Franklin kept his room because of the painful illness from which he was suffering in these last years, but, as their president and as the supreme authority on the matter under discussion, he must have been very present in the thoughts of the members and in their discussion. Furthermore, Dr. Jones was Franklin's personal physician, and it is certain that the conversation must have turned to the great man's illness and the approaching close of a life which had so changed the lives of all.

Philosophical Hall was nearly completed, and the Society was for the first time to stand within a physical embodiment. Franklin might never live to preside at a meeting there, yet it seemed eminently ap-

propriate that his portrait should hang upon its walls to bring to them a sense of his continuing presence. We know nothing, of course, of the discussion and have only the formal resolution which was passed.

> *Resolved*, that a portrait of Dr. Franklin, the president of the Society, shall, as speedily as is convenient, be executed in the best manner,—to be perpetually kept in one of their apartments; and that Dr. Jones & Mr. Rittenhouse shall apply to Mr. Peale to prepare and execute the same.[1]

Had Charles Willson Peale been present at this meeting he would undoubtedly have explained that the Society already owned a portrait of Franklin, a copy Peale himself had made from David Martin's excellent likeness and his own gift to the Society. The minutes recorded its acceptance, on December 16, 1785, with thanks and a request that Mr. Peale keep the painting "till the Society shall have a convenient place for its reception."[2]

In 1785, Franklin had just returned from France, and Peale had been able to add a new likeness, painted from life, to his portrait gallery of heroes of the Revolution, thus replacing the copy from Martin which had less contemporary interest. Soon after, Peale had set out in earnest to expand his portrait gallery into a museum of natural science, that project which was to occupy most of his abundant energy during the next forty years. At the outset, he had spent much of his time in Maryland, where he could both collect specimens and earn needed funds by painting portraits.

When the Philosophical Society passed its resolution, Peale had just returned from the South, bringing with him sixty new birds. He was busy stuffing them, mounting them against their painted habitat backgrounds, and putting the other exhibits in order. He records in his diary[3]:

> I was ready to return to Maryland, but the Philosophical determined to have a portrait of Dr. Franklin painted. Mr. Rittenhouse and Dr. Jones was appointed to apply to the Doctor to set for my taking the likeness. On my waiting on the Doctor I found him confined to his bed, and he requested [me] to copy my portrait of him and that he would try to give me an opportunity to finish it by his setting again. Finding that I should be detained

[1] *Early Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society . . . from 1744 to 1838* (Philadelphia, 1884), 174.

[2] *Ibid.*, 136.

[3] American Philosophical Society.

with this picture, I acquainted Mr. [Jonathan Dickinson] Sergeant that I would now paint the portrait of his Lady which he had some time past spoke to me for. I finished this portrait and got the Doctor to set, but his pain was so great that he could only sit ¼ hour, and was ill, from the pressure of the stone, for 24 hours after. This being his situation, I am compelled to decline giving the Doctor further trouble.

Peale set out again for Baltimore on July 30, leaving the Doctor's likeness, we may assume, on an unfinished canvas. The likeness is essentially a copy of the small bust portrait in his museum gallery,[4] very slightly altered by the fifteen-minute sitting which followed—the hair is a little thinner and more gray, but there is no essential alteration of the features.

Peale did not realize that Franklin had treated other artists in the same manner for ten years past. Posing had long been tedious and physically uncomfortable for him, and after 1779, in Paris, feeling that the artists who were clamoring for the honor and opportunity of a sitting could just as well copy the Duplessis canvas or the Caffieri bust, he had insisted that they do so and only on the rarest occasions had granted a sitting from life. He never appreciated the fact that the life portrait's reflection cannot be caught with full value in a copy.

To Peale, on the other hand, this was a serious deprivation, raising a question as to whether the copy from Martin which he had already given to the Philosophical Society was not sufficient for its purpose. The new portrait must, to be right, outshine the old. He finished it in such a way as to make it both a likeness and a monument. Appropriately for a society dedicated to scientific advance, it commemorates particularly Franklin's research on lightning. The composition is similar to the Mason Chamberlin portrait, prints of which Peale must have seen. His subject sits by a window, beyond which lightning cracks from a vivid sky, crashing down into a building below and filling its panes with light. This is a separate statement within the picture—a feature of formal portraiture of the day—and the Doctor is properly oblivious to it. He sits placidly, concerned only with his own thoughts, his fingers holding a small lightning rod, another rod lying on the table before him. Also on the table is spread a broad sheet of manuscript on which the artist has copied in longhand a passage from the *Experiments and Observations on Electricity* of 1769—

[4] Now at The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.

the crucial and the climactic words, in Peale's estimation, of Franklin's career.[5] Cleverly, he breaks off the statement the moment its point is established.

In every stroke of lightning, I am of opinion that the stream of electric fluid, moving to restore the equilibrium between the cloud and the earth, does always previously find its passage, and mark out, as I may say, its own course, taking in its way all the conductors it can find, such as metals, damp walls, moist wood, &c., and will go considerably out of a direct course, for the sake of the assistance of good conductors; and that, in this course, it is actually moving, tho' silently and imperceptibly, before the explosion, in and among the conductors; which explosion happens only when the conductors cannot discharge it as fast as they receive it, by reason of their being incompleat, disunited, too small, or not of the best materials for conducting. Metalline rods, therefore,

Peale left Philadelphia on July 30, 1789, and was absent from home most of the next two years. He was back in town in April, 1790, and it is possible that Rembrandt Peale is correct in stating that he accompanied his father to Franklin Court in a last attempt to get a sitting from life on April 11, 1790, ten days before Franklin's death. Rembrandt was then eleven years of age, and his memoirs, written sixty-five years later, are of doubtful accuracy.[6] Charles Willson Peale did not resume a settled life in Philadelphia until August, 1791, after his second marriage and his return from a wedding trip in Maryland. He is found again as a regular attendant at the meetings of the American Philosophical Society, now held, as they had been for a year and a half, in Philosophical Hall. It is probable that the still life and background of the Franklin portrait were painted in at this time.

Peale was present at the meeting of December 2, 1791, when the matter of the Franklin portrait at last came up for discussion, and we may venture a surmise that he had brought to the meeting both the newly completed painting and the copy from Martin given in 1785 and kept in his own possession ever since, both canvases unframed. The meeting did not accept the new portrait, but voted that a suitable frame should be purchased for the copy from Martin, and that Peale should paint instead a portrait of the newly elected president, David Rittenhouse.[7] It is interesting that Peale's Rittenhouse wears

5 Albert Henry Smyth, ed., *Writings of Benjamin Franklin* (New York, 1905), III, 159–160.
6 *The Crayon*, I, 370.
7 *Early Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society . . .* , 199.

the same costume as his Franklin of 1789—a blue brocade dressing gown lined with pale pink silk—suggestive that the members had praised the rejected portrait and asked that the new subject be presented in the same attire.

After its rejection, the 1789 half-length portrait of Franklin disappears from sight for some sixty years, until it was given to The Historical Society of Pennsylvania by James J. Barclay on November 20, 1852. It is framed in a carved molding found only on the more ambitious Peale work and only on Peale work of this general period, indicating that it probably found a buyer soon after the Philosophical Society declined to receive it. That hypothetical individual may have been John Barclay, mayor of Philadelphia in 1791–1792 and an anti-Federalist politician whose thought and principles were certainly in line with the thinking of both Franklin and Peale. John Barclay died on August 8, 1816. His son, James Joseph Barclay, who was born on January 15, 1794, and died on August 16, 1885, lived out his long life span as an attorney, a philanthropist, a book collector—just the sort of person who, if he did not inherit the portrait, would have purchased it for the Historical Society, realizing the appropriateness of the gift.

Peale's portrait of Franklin has the strength and the limitation which mark the portraits of others of his important sitters. He was fully aware of his subject's greatness, and almost as overawed by it as he had been when he had first called on Franklin in London in 1767. The exchange of letters following that interview reveals Franklin as a benign and kindly adviser, but held apart from friendship by Peale's timid and fumbling humility. The three ensuing decades had brought Peale to the height of his powers, but had not wholly overcome his diffidence. The wisdom, humor, and warmth of Franklin are not in this portrait, but we may depend upon it as a record of what the painter saw before him. He has not even asked his subject to remove his glasses, as other painters did. Franklin wore his glasses constantly, and they are there, on his nose.

The next generation was to move still farther away from this respect for the accurate record. Their new reverence for more aesthetic aspects than physical fact is well illustrated in the work of Charles Willson Peale's son Rembrandt, most of all in his famous Washington portrait, a new interpretation of the big, sleepy-eyed Virginian's face

which showed it glowing and uplifted, just as the eyes of the new generation wished to see it. In reinterpreting Franklin in this spirit, Rembrandt's first act, naturally, was to remove the spectacles. We see his procedure in a tinted pen-and-ink drawing of about 1845, owned by R. N. Williams, 2nd. It is a new and gently hieratic rendering of his father's likeness. Without the glasses, however, the whole aspect is changed. The lines of Franklin's expressive mouth, expressionless in the original portrait, are here softened and stylized. The eyes are blue, illustrating one criterion by which a copy may be distinguished from a life portrait of Franklin. His hazel eyes showed, in certain lights, a gray-blue tone. Some painters, working from life, caught clear hazel, while others, among them Charles Willson Peale, noted also the gray-blue. Copyists tend to paint the eyes either brown or blue. Rembrandt in this drawing has made them a pale blue.

However one's inclinations in art may tend, whether toward the realities of life or toward poetic and inspired interpretation, the fact remains that Charles Willson Peale's formal half-length portrait of Franklin, with its concentration on the physical presence of the man and on one essential element of his greatness, is eminently well suited to its purpose. And Fate, in bringing it to the gallery of the Historical Society, has done no less the appropriate thing—has found a right home for the picture and has brought to these walls the reflection of a life which will live forever in our history.

Dickinson College CHARLES COLEMAN SELLERS

R. Norris Williams, 2nd

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN
By Rembrandt Peale