Rembrandt Peale’s Life in Art

Rembrandt Peale’s career as an artist began when he was barely a youth in the early 1790s and extended until shortly before his death in 1860 at the age of eighty-two. Rich and varied, full of striving and frustration, it is a career one could use as a primer on American art prior to the Civil War.

As it was for the majority of his peers, Peale’s artistic and financial mainstay was painting portraits. Initiated into this art by his father, Rembrandt rapidly found his own mode as a portraitist, producing solid, veristic, straightforward works. By 1795, he had painted a life portrait of Washington startling in its frank admission of the hero’s humanity (Fig. 1). His arrestingly clear yet sensitive portrait of his bespectacled younger brother Rubens posing with a geranium from his father’s museum, has come to serve as an examplar of the American realist vision

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This portrait of Rubens Peale With a Geranium, 1801 has recently been acquired at auction by the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. from the collection of Mrs. Norman Woolworth. The fact that it brought the record price for an American painting signals the growing interest in Rembrandt Peale’s too long neglected art.
admired Stuart’s work. A portrait of that artist, painted jointly by Rembrandt and his father during their trip to Washington in 1805, is a simulacrum of Stuart’s style. Rembrandt’s most successful and insightful Presidential portrait, the *Thomas Jefferson* of 1805, is also indebted to Stuart’s manner although Rembrandt’s interest in achieving a fluid and painterly style had also been stimulated by his trip to England in 1802 and 1803 (Figs. 4 & 5).

Between 1808 and the end of 1810, Rembrandt traveled twice to Paris. Although he did not follow a formal course of study, he worked assiduously, spending many hours studying in a Louvre now filled with Napoleon’s artistic booty. Peale went to Paris both to gain a technical mastery he could not attain in America and to gain exposure to the most elevated forms of artistic production. When he returned, he was not just another portrait painter but an artist seeking to produce art at its highest level in terms of both technical excellence and intellectual ambition. Peale now came to share the dreams of some of his more ambitious and idealistic countrymen such as John Trumbull, Washington Allston, William Dunlap, John Vanderlyn, and Samuel F. B. Morse who chose to accept the challenge of history painting.

Ultimately, most of these artists would discover that history painting in America was a tremendous risk. It was extraordinarily difficult to secure public or private patronage for such time-consuming and costly large-scale depictions of historical, literary, or religious themes. Creating a work on speculation might seem viable at first but, for most artists, this almost inevitably resulted in debt or only a small profit after exhibition, travel, and maintenance costs were deducted. Such was Rembrandt’s experience with his monumentally scaled exposition on human mortality, *The Court of Death* (Fig. 6). Initially, his income from the exhibition of this painting was large but profits eventually dwindled. In their desire to produce works that could be considered competitive with European productions and to fulfill the Enlightenment theory that only great themes produced on a large scale could count as great art, these idealistic and ambitious artists often created

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only liabilities and ultimately felt only a sense of failure. Rembrandt's sporadic forays into history painting lasted for fourteen years culminating with his *Washington Before Yorktown* of 1824 (Fig. 7). Peale hoped this painting would be purchased by the federal government, but it remained unsold.

Rembrandt's portraiture between 1810 and 1824 was more successful. Peale's European trips had resulted in a refinement of his artistic technique, and he came home capable of producing strongly conceived and impeccably executed works. The portrait of his father, *Charles Willson Peale* from 1812 (Fig. 8), is an extraordinary mix of high focus realism, psychological insight, and technical accomplishment. His portrait of *George Taylor, Jr.* (Fig. 9) begun the previous year displays his attempts at this time to gain mastery of the full-length figure, as well as a beautifully orchestrated sense of light and color. Unlike the portrait of *Charles Willson Peale*, however, it is a remote and suave conception, yielding little of the subject's personality. These expressive polarities of immediacy and remoteness would remain throughout his career. In most cases, these differences were either the function of Peale's degree of affinity for the sitter, or of his conscious decision that certain persons should be transformed into more idealized images.

In 1814, Rembrandt and his family moved from their native Philadelphia to Baltimore where Peale proceeded to establish himself as the city's major artist. He constructed an elegant museum building which still stands on North Holliday Street. Here he exhibited his art, the art of his contemporaries, and scientific specimens. He held musical performances and described the Museum's character by advertising the institution in the local papers as "A Rendezvous for Taste." Rembrandt's Baltimore Museum differed from his father's Philadelphia Museum in its greater emphasis on the arts. Rembrandt believed that part of his responsibility as an American artist was to

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3 This painting can be dated through Charles Willson Peale's notation in his Daybook on November 2, 1811 that he visited Rembrandt in his studio while he was painting Mr. Taylor's son. Charles Willson Peale, Daybook, v.2. Peale-Sellers Collection, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia.

4 The Peale Museum, now the Municipal Museum of the City of Baltimore, contains a significant number of works by Rembrandt Peale and his family.
educate and sensitize the public to the beauty and values afforded by the arts.

During his Baltimore period, Rembrandt’s portraits often revealed both technical virtuosity and psychological depth. His portrait of General John Striker of 1816 (Fig. 10) was part of his series commemorating Baltimore’s heroes of the War of 1812 commissioned for the City Hall. A strongly individualized yet dignified image, it is cast in a romantic vein with its dramatic use of light and pungent color. In it Peale synthesized his British and French artistic experiences with his native realism and, in so doing, found a voice of his own. Similarly, his portrait of Baltimore merchant, John McKim, Jr. (Fig. 11), reveals a subtle blending of the traditions of French and American portraiture. A sensitive portrait painted with a subdued and limited palette, it is brought to life by Peale’s use of glowing flesh tones and strong clear contrasts of black, white and red. The large somewhat worn books with their carefully adjusted shades of brown, gold, red and green are softly touched by light, as are McKim’s hands and the small folded white note he holds. They form a masterly still-life counterpoint to the portrait.

Peale overextended himself financially and his departure from Baltimore in 1822 resulted from monetary woes. His establishment of the first Gas Company for Baltimore proved costly for Rembrandt, chronically short of capital, although others ultimately made a profit from the project. The Museum was also a financial drain until he turned it over to his brother Rubens and left for New York City to concentrate on his painting.

Rembrandt wished to create a place for himself in the history of American art. He sought eminent sitters and hoped for larger, ambitious portrait commissions. The creation of his idealized composite likeness of America’s pre-eminent hero, George Washington, became his consuming project during the early 1820s. Rembrandt spent several years experimenting and studying the various life portraits of the

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5 In April 1816 the City Council commissioned Rembrandt to paint portraits of Lieutenant Colonel George Armistead (1817-18), General John Striker (1816), Mayor Edward Johnson (1816), and General Samuel Smith (1817-18). In 1819, portraits of Andrew Jackson and Joshua Barney were added to these “Defenders” portraits to make a total of six. These portraits now hang in the Peale Museum, Baltimore.
first President. His major sources narrowed down, however, to his own 1795 life portrait (Fig. 1), the 1795 portrait done by his father, C.W. Peale, and the now famous bust done by the French sculptor, Jean-Antoine Houdon in 1785. More than a portrait, his Patriae Pater of 1824 evokes a history painting in its large scale, architectural framework and symbolic accoutrements (Fig. 12). Peale hoped that this visual enshrinement would become America's "Standard National Likeness" of her hero. In 1832, the United States Government purchased his Patriae Pater for the Capitol.  

Rembrandt's trip to Italy with his son Michel Angelo during 1829 and 1830 fulfilled his long time desire to visit Italy and study its great painters. He returned with numerous projects underway. He had written a travel guide, Notes on Italy, worked on his drawing books and completed more than twenty copies after famous Old Master paintings. Peale intended and needed to sell these works to help defray the costs of his trip but the idea of keeping them together as a Gallery for those unable to travel to Italy to see the "Originals" was very attractive to him. In presenting his carefully executed "Copies" to the public, Rembrandt saw himself not just as an artist/copyist but as a teacher and disseminator of culture. He firmly believed that a faithful copy could be an experiential substitute for the original and a precise indicator of technical information and expressive characteristics. Years later, he wrote at length about the value of "Copies"  

6 Rembrandt referred to his Washington as the "Standard National Likeness" in the pamphlets he wrote to promote his portrait. Two identical copies of this painting are known to exist. One is in the Collection of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (see Fig.12), the other is in the Collection of Mr. James H. Ricau, New York.  

7 In Rome and Florence Peale copied works by such painters as Raphael, Rubens, Coreggio, Bronzino, Domenichino, Titian, Guido Reni, and Salvator Rosa. See, "Catalogue of Peale's Italian Pictures, Now Exhibiting at Sully and Earle's Gallery," Philadelphia, 1831. Most of these paintings are presently unlocated.  

8 In his circular, "The Fine Arts," which was designed to attract orders for copies of the great masters to help fund his trip to Italy, Peale was very specific about the value of a fine copy. "A correct copy is next in value to the original itself. Where the original is removed from all chance of purchase and above all price, it is only by an accurate and well-attested copy that we, at a distance, can judge of its merit and enjoy its beauty; and it is only by a comparison with those works of established reputation that the labours of our own Artists can be duly appreciated; that we can be led to compete with them, or derive advantage from their influence." This circular is attached to a letter from Rembrandt Peale to Coleman Sellers, June 4, 1828 in the Peale-Sellers Collection, American Philosophical Society.
in his "Notes of the Painting Room." In producing his many copies after his *Patriae Pater* (George Washington "Copy") (Fig. 13) during the 1840s and 1850s, he acted on the premise that a well-executed copy of an original work had a value and effect similar to its source.  

This reasoning suggested that "art" could be made readily available to more than a select few; it could, in fact, in terms of accessibility, be democratized.

Such ideas became the hallmark of Rembrandt Peale's later career. Although Peale continued to paint portraits into his eighties, in mid-life he turned his energies to writing and, especially, to teaching. The time had come for him to rethink his career and to produce both painted and written work which would resolve the youthful dreams of his artistic career with the realities he acknowledged at middle age. While Peale continued to have a steady portrait practice in the 1840s and 1850s, he also painted landscapes and fancy pieces. Some of these were copies or adaptations after the work of other artists as illustrated in Peale's *View near Brighton*, a work he described as "enlarged from Schmidt" (Fig. 14).

Many of these less ambitious works seem to have been done for the pure pleasure of painting. On the other hand, Peale was steadily working on what he felt was his obligation to artistic posterity. He recorded his "Reminiscences" for publication in the respected art journal *The Crayon* in the 1850s and worked steadily at refining his handbook of artistic techniques and recipes, the "Notes of the Painting Room." Peale was strongly committed to the idea that young artists should enjoy the benefits of their elders' knowledge and he intended to impart his "Experience of more than half a century" to those who followed him. He described his work as designed "to assist his [the artist's] judgment, remove his doubts and increase his means."  

Rembrandt sought to meet the obligation he felt to his non-artistic

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9 On page fourteen of his 1846 edition of his "Washington" pamphlet, Rembrandt Peale offered copies of his Washington portrait for sale. "Hitherto the author of this Portrait, thus warmly recommended to his countrymen, has scarcely had leisure to make any copies of it. He is now the only painter living who ever beheld Washington. Satisfied that as it is in his power to make them from his own painting with the most desirable accuracy, he is prepared to execute copies from his Portrait. . . ."

posterity with his lecture on “Washington and his Portraits.” As the sole surviving artist to have known Washington and the artists who painted him from life, Peale was uniquely qualified to entertain audiences with his observations and lamp-lit copies of several of the major portraits done of the First President. During Peale’s last decade, Washington was his greatest concern. For him the lecture and the facsimile portraits of his 1824 “Standard National Likeness” that he was now being steadily commissioned to paint meant a fulfillment of at least part of his early ambition. To have created for society a meaningful image of the country’s greatest hero legitimized his life in art. His ability to share and transmit something across time affirmed the usefulness of his profession and led him to hope that a role for the arts in America was growing increasingly secure.

Rembrandt had shared with many of the members of his own generation high hopes for an artistic career. These artists believed they could help teach and refine Americans. This ideal of the artist’s role was certainly alive in educated circles in America but steady support for artists was not. In reality, artists were a diverse group; in Peale’s generation, as in many other generations, artists divided into the idealists who worked hard at raising the level of art, but who ultimately had to scramble to maintain themselves, and that steady, less technically and ideologically schooled, group of painters who with a more limited agenda for cultural success, merely painted the best they could and achieved fine, though often unimaginative results. Yet, whether they were “face painters” or aspiring history painters, artists were similarly intent upon professional status and sought to settle into society among the educated and/or monied classes where patronage was more readily available. As a result, they chose to present a dignified and genteel image and their self-portraits inevitably reveal them dressed in frock coats, not in shirt sleeves.

Rembrandt painted such a portrait of himself in 1850 (Fig. 15). Serious and intellectual, he looks, at first, quite as conservative as the productions of the last decade of his career. Yet, if Peale’s emphasis on subdued and simple portraiture in tandem with his fancy pieces, modest landscapes and “copies” of his Washington seemed too formal and standard to many of the freer spirits of the 1850s, there lurked some other sentiments in the man who produced them. Beneath the delicate linearity of his spectacles is a kind and direct gaze perfectly consonant with the near smile of his mouth. His splendid white hair,
which he jocularly referred to as his "plumes," catches the light and his luminous flesh tones light up the canvas.

If Rembrandt ceased to be an innovative spirit in his later years, he did not cease working. Always a bit of a romantic in the intensity of his dedication to art, Rembrandt chose to end the introductory essay in his "Notes of the Painting Room," not with a statement by an eighteenth-century theoretician on the arts but with a quote from John Ruskin—the central voice of the new order. "Art, properly so called, is no recreation; it cannot be learned at spare moments, nor pursued when we have nothing better to do: to advance it, men's lives must be given; and to receive it, their hearts."  

The essays collected in this issue were first presented in March of 1985 at the Rembrandt Peale Symposium that accompanied the opening of the Peale exhibition at the Historical Society. They provide a well-considered discussion of Rembrandt Peale as artist, teacher, and author, and they illuminate in greater detail aspects of Peale's life and work which could only be briefly touched upon in the exhibition and catalogue.

We are fortunate in our contributors, in that they have brought great expertise and a diverse background of information to bear upon their individual studies of Peale. Dr. Lillian B. Miller's depth of knowledge of the entire Peale family is unparalleled. She, more than anyone, knows the conditions that shaped Rembrandt both as a man and an artist. Dr. Lois Fink's research and writings on the Academic tradition in the Fine Arts in America, as well as her present study of American artists working in France, place her in an excellent position to assess Rembrandt Peale's experience of French art, its methods and meaning to his work. Dr. Paul Staiti's research, writing, and exhibitions on the life of Samuel F. B. Morse, the artist and inventor, have provided him with

11 "Notes of the Painting Room," 14.
12 It should be noted that we were also pleased to have Dr. William H. Gerds as a participant in this Symposium. His fine paper on the still-life paintings of Rembrandt's elder brother Raphaele Peale will be included in his soon to be published book on that artist.
a unique vantage point from which to view Peale. Staiti's familiarity with Morse's cultural ambitions and writings on the arts has allowed him to assess Peale's goals and writings against those of one of Rembrandt's most eminent fellow artists.

Peter J. Parker has brought his many years as Curator of Prints and Manuscripts at the Society to bear upon Peale's "Notes of the Painting Room." His notable observations on this manuscript help to establish the meaning this work had for Peale.

The addition of Carrie H. Scheflow's thoughtful and painstaking chronology provides an excellent overview and documentation of Rembrandt Peale's long life. In its notation of personal details and projected plans, alongside simple facts, the chronology offers the reader a sense of the aspirations and stresses, as well as the pleasures and disappointments, of the artist's life.

This issue of PMHB is envisioned as a companion to the exhibition catalogue, Rembrandt Peale 1778-1860. A Life in the Arts. Ideally, the two volumes should be used together to provide a rich body of material on the life and work of Peale. Rembrandt Peale was among the major artists of his time and it is hoped that the research done to produce the exhibition and these publications will be useful both to those wishing to study Peale further and to those seeking information for the comparative study of American Art.

Historical Society of Pennsylvania

CAROL E. HEVNER
ILLUSTRATIONS


11. *John McKim, Jr.*, c. 1812. Oil on canvas. 33 7/16" x 28 1/2".


28. *Portrait of Mr. Jacob Gerard Koch*, c. 1814. Oil on canvas. 34" x 29". Collection: Los Angeles County Museum, Los Angeles, California. Museum purchase with funds provided from Mr. and Mrs. William Preston Harrison, Mary D. Keeler Bequest and Dr. Dorothea Moore.

29. *Jane Griffith Koch (Mrs. Jacob Gerard)*, c. 1814. Oil on canvas. 34" x 29". Collection: Los Angeles County Museum of Art.


Figure 1
George Washington.
Figure 2

Rubens Peale With A Geranium.
Figure 3

Benson J. Lossing.
Figure 4
Gilbert Stuart.
Figure 5

*Thomas Jefferson.*
Figure 6

The Court of Death.
Figure 7
Washington Before Yorktown.
Figure 8
*Charles Willson Peale.*
Figure 9
George Taylor, Jr. of Philadelphia.
Figure 10
General John Striker.
Figure 11

John McKim, Jr.
Figure 12
George Washington, Patriae Pater.
Figure 13
George Washington "Copy."
Figure 14

View Near Brighton.
Figure 15
Rembrandt Peale, Self-Portrait.