Rembrandt Peale on Art

Besides pursuing his artistic labors, Mr. Peale gave considerable time to labors of the pen, especially to literary efforts relating to his profession. He published a record of European life and study; a small work entitled Graphics, relating to elementary drawing; and leaves behind him the manuscript of a work setting forth the experience of the studio, containing the valuable result of experiments made during a long life in the technical branches of the profession.

—John Durand
Obituary of Rembrandt Peale
The Crayon, November, 1860

Durand succinctly summarized Rembrandt Peale’s contribution to the literature of the fine arts. In some ways, as Durand’s uninspired prose seems to suggest, Peale’s writings were inconsequential with regard both to his own career and to the development of American art and aesthetic thought. There is, in fact, little evidence to suggest either that his words were profound distillations of practice into theory or that they influenced his fellow artists. His writing was timid and derivative. And like the work of many artists and thinkers born in the late eighteenth century, Peale’s books and manuscripts displayed the intellectual disorientation of someone trying to navigate the terra incognita of the post-Jacksonian period. Grafting the emergent egalitarian ethic onto his patrician thought, Peale, like his peers John Vanderlyn and Samuel F. B. Morse, spent his late career trying to find his equilibrium between two conflicting eras in American culture.

Writing was important to Peale. The sheer volume of his written work between 1830 and his death in 1860 would be sufficient for a professional writer. Yet Peale rarely acknowledged in public the
prominence of his writings in his late life; nor did he—or could he—admit to their profound importance as efforts to resuscitate a fading career. In his reminiscences, which appeared in abbreviated form in Charles Edward Lester’s *The Artists of America* (1846) and in occasional installments of *The Crayon* (1855 and after), only one work, *Graphics*, is described at length and evaluated fairly.¹ *Notes on Italy* (1831) gets scant attention, and the other original works, “Lecture on the Fine Arts” and the monumental “Notes of the Painting Room,” though mentioned, have remained in manuscript and as a result have been virtually obliterated from history.²

By considering these key texts we can confirm and animate the thought and the art of Rembrandt Peale. The values, assumptions and characteristics that defined the young Peale—an enlightenment education, a competitive zeal, a commitment to excellence, a dedication to the public weal, a frequent lack of originality, and a sense of self-destiny and quest for a reputation—all these are evident in the writings, sometimes overtly, but often covertly. Peale’s literary point of view is both reflective and reflexive. Based on ideas collected over a lifetime, these are “summing up” works, an intellectual last will and testament of his gifts to American culture. They are also mirrors of his own late life anxiety over his position in the history of American art. How, and for what, Peale must have asked himself repeatedly, am I to be remembered?

Though the writings were not explicitly autobiographical, they were self-promotional. *Graphics*, for example, contained excerpts from lit-

erary reviews as well as endorsements solicited by Peale. Quoted were a wide variety of authorities including Thomas Sully, Josiah Quincy, and The Literary Gazette, the last essaying that whether or not the manual worked, "the public will still be greatly benefitted, and will owe an obligation to Rembrandt Peale." The key word here is "public." For Peale’s station in the literature of fine arts—the way he wanted to be remembered as a writer—was as the great democratizer unlocking the mysteries of art for the American people. Peale’s efforts to popularize drawing, aesthetics and the mechanics of art earned him a central place in the development of cultural democracy in mid-nineteenth-century America.

One of Peale’s first essays on art coincided with his first of many Patriae Pater portraits of Washington. In 1823, Peale conceived the idea of creating “the Standard National Likeness” of Washington, which he would replicate dozens of times. The following year, he wrote a short piece in the inaugural issue of The Philadelphia Museum discussing America’s congeniality with the arts and the necessity for history painting. The conjunction of Washington image and fine arts essay marked the creation of Peale’s democratic agenda, one that would be based largely on the aesthetics and mechanics of the facsimile. Peale exhibited and sold copies and variants of the Patriae Pater during the last fifteen years of his life in order to elevate and inspire large numbers of Americans. For the same reasons, the ideas he tentatively expressed in the original “Fine Arts” essay proved to be seminal expressions reworked and expanded in print and oratory for two decades. This concentration in Peale’s career on repeating a single pictorial image and a single ideological module is indicative not so

1 William Dunlap openly criticized Peale for soliciting from prominent Americans “certificates” validating the accuracy of Peale’s life portrait of Washington: “I [Dunlap] blame Mr. Peale for degrading himself by submitting to the expedient of a certificate . . . ,” History of the Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States, II (New York, 1834), 56. Yet, in the 1830s, self-promotion was becoming common in the American artistic and literary worlds. In its Bulletin, the Apollo Association, later the American Art Union, regularly quoted or paraphrased flattering reviews that appeared in distinguished magazines like The Knickerbocker. Similarly, Walt Whitman was in the habit of self-advertising when attempting to acquire a literary reputation early in his career.

4 Rembrandt Peale, Graphics, end pages.

5 Rembrandt Peale, "The Fine Arts."
much of an opportunistic desire to achieve prominence as entrepreneurially as possible, as it was a genuine method through which Peale could address, persuade and inspire a mass audience.  

Peale's first trip to Italy in 1829-30, accompanied by a *Patriae Pater* and by his son Michael Angelo, was designed, significantly, for making copies of old master paintings. 7 Virtually intersecting with the European itineraries of Samuel Morse and Thomas Cole, Peale's journey was unlike theirs in that it was capped by a 328-page book, *Notes on Italy*, that was published in 1831 by Carey and Lea of Philadelphia. Hoping that book "will excite some interest and produce me some advantage in America," Peale evidently considered *Notes on Italy* complimentary to his old master copies. 8 Both would defer the cost of the travel abroad, but—more importantly—they would act together as instruments of public education. Thus Peale could bring Raphael's *Madonna della Seggiola* to America in the form of a copy and, at the same time, through his book, make all of Italian culture available to his readers. 

The old master copies, as Peale wrote to Lester, would "serve as a nucleus to form a National Gallery or Library of the Fine Arts." 9 If American taste were to rise, art should have a technology, the facsimile, that would be equivalent to the technology available to literature, the printing press. "In forming other Libraries," Peale wrote, "it is not the ambition of our projectors to acquire rare and unpublished manuscripts; but rather to possess the best editions of those works which have been multiplied by printing; and this for the

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6 Peale's efforts to popularize are also very evident in his Baltimore Museum (1814-22). Displaying pictures and manufactured objects, its public, didactic function was an American equivalent to the London Society for the Encouragement of Art, Manufacturers and Commerce. 

7 A catalogue of Peale's seventeen copies is provided in the *Catalogue of Peale's Italian Pictures Now Exhibiting at Sully and Earle's Gallery*, Philadelphia, 1831. Charles Edwards Lester claims in *The Artists of America* that the copies were for "some gentlemen of taste in New York" (212); Lester adds, however, that they were "mostly disposed of in Boston." (215). William Dunlap states in his *History* that they were mostly purchased by a Mr. Bussy of Boston (II, p. 55). 

8 Rembrandt Peale to Haines and Sellers, November 30, 1829, Historical Society of Pennsylvania. In this letter Peale also says that he hopes to defray the cost of the trip with the profits from *Notes on Italy*. 

improvement and extension of human knowledge—not for the gratification of a selfish and exclusive antiquarian taste.”

That virtuous, democratic ethic, one that Samuel Morse simultaneously expressed in the public exhibition of *The Gallery of the Louvre* (1832-33), a picture of European pictures, extended to *Notes on Italy*.

The *Notes* offered the domestic reader, like the viewer of Peale’s old master copies, facsimile experiences of Italian art, galleries, history and nature. It is nearly an encyclopedic book, shaped by guide books and popular novels. When, for example, Peale, en route to Italy, had encountered goats, he revealingly commented that “neither the goat herds nor the shepherds we have yet met with at all resemble the interesting creatures of novelists.” Yet *Notes on Italy* is more detailed than most novels and more lush and personal than many guide books of the era. At his best, Peale could be both descriptive and picturesque:

> The streets, without foot pavements, and muddy, are alive with a healthy and rosy population, clunking along on their wooden shoes, talking loud and laughing amidst the screaming of numerous parrots, whose cages are hung out at the shop doors and upper windows.

Traveling from Naples to Rome to Florence to Venice, his observations on culture and history were equally animated. In Pompeii, for example, he was less captivated by art than (as might be expected of a Peale) he was by petrified eggs, skeletons, and the world’s largest cameo. The living museums of Italy, the historical environment, more often than not, took precedence in his mind over individual works of art and art collections.

In writing about pictures and sculpture in *Notes on Italy*, Peale was curiously clinical, empirical, even detached; he rarely showed enthusiasm or offered critiques. There are certain artists that attracted him strongly: Michelangelo, Gianbologna, Guido Reni, Cigoli, Bronzino, Ludovico Carracci, Rubens, Veronese, Tintoretto and Domenichino.

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10 *Ibid.* Peale first wrote these thoughts, less eloquently, in a promotional flyer of 1828 in which he publicly solicited commissions to copy European pictures while abroad; Rembrandt Peale to Coleman Sellers, June 4, 1828, American Philosophical Society.
11 Peale twice indicates he consulted guidebooks on his trip; *Notes on Italy*, 143, 146.
12 Rembrandt Peale, *Notes on Italy*, 38.
Yet, despite the many hours he spent in the galleries, there were precious few extended discussions of art. Where, the reader asks, is the mark of Peale’s sophisticated artist’s eye? One can see Peale gravitate, with some important exceptions, toward paintings that were realistic, executed in a precise linear manner and of controlled palette—in short, like works of his own. But nowhere did Peale make an overt aesthetic stand, except where he found certain subjects, such as Guercino’s *Ecce Homo*, offensive: “The eyes are blood shot with pain and grief, and large drops of blood are pouring down the forehead. I cannot but consider it a most ignoble, disgusting, and unfortunate exhibition of The Saviour; and almost lament its excellence as a piece of painting.”  

A rare outburst. Even among the works by artists he liked, few lived up to Peale’s expectations. Having wanted so long to study European art, and now jaded by the inflated visions created by his prolonged deprivation, Peale discovered, like many American artists traveling abroad for the first time, that a real Guido was never as good as his idea of a Guido.

As some indication of his narrative priorities, Peale preferred to concentrate on describing the height, not the architecture, of the dome of St. Peter’s, from which his traveling companions shamelessly sang *Hail, Columbia*. When in Genoa Peale saw Rubens’s *St. Ignatius* in the church of S. Ambrogio, he exclaimed with awe that it was “a most extraordinary production of art.” Yet, while he devoted only one sentence to that picture, he took three pages to describe lavishly the talents of Rosa Taddei, a Neapolitan woman who was an improvisator. Peale related in detail her improvisation of a confrontation between two doctors, a lawyer and a jealous woman, and he was especially impressed by her imaginary dialogue between the dome of St. Peter’s and the dome of Florence Cathedral.

Clearly, as one must conclude, it is in the social anecdotes and in the descriptions of places—the wonders of the world—that Peale excelled. Otherwise, except for a random theory that Parmigianino’s mannerist style was the result of painting on narrow walls, Peale shied away from deep aesthetic analysis. Why did he not rise above gratuitous, and even trivial discussions of art? Undoubtedly, he was

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14 Rembrandt Peale, *Notes on Italy*, 142.
15 Rembrandt Peale, *Notes on Italy*, 259.
thinking and passing judgment on all he saw, but here, in a book meant to be a guide for the cultivated traveler rather than an aesthetic tract for fellow painters, intellectual content was deliberately sacrificed for mass appeal. In the final analysis, one can well understand the artist and historian William Dunlap's perplexed reaction to *Notes on Italy*:

In this publication he has shown himself an acute observer, and, in many instances, an excellent describer; but Italy and the eternal city is such an eternal theme, that the veteran reader feels as if he were going over pages familiar to him, although perfectly original.\(^{16}\)

Following *Notes on Italy*, Peale wrote his most lasting and influential contribution to the literature of art, *Graphics: A Manual of Drawing and Writing, For the Use of Schools and Families*. First published in 1834, it was revised, according to Peter Marzio, into four editions spanning nineteen printings, the last of which was produced posthumously in 1866.\(^{17}\) It was hardly the first American drawing book. Already well known were Fielding Lucas's *Progressive Drawing Book* (1827), which had exemplary drawings by John H. B. Latrobe and coloring by Peale's cousin, Anna Claypoole Peale, and John Rubens Smith's *A Key to the Art of Drawing the Human Figure* (1831). Like his predecessors, Peale expressed in *Graphics* an aesthetic rooted in eighteenth-century English and French academic theory, especially that of Roger de Piles, Charles Du Fresnoy, Gerard de Lairesse, Joshua Reynolds and William Hogarth. All of them in different ways asserted that line was the agent of ideal form. With that assumption, Peale derived a methodical program of instruction that began with exercises in straight, then curved lines, and concluded with studies in proportion, space, perspective, human form and, only as a last consideration, irregularity and shading.

Yet, in spite of the obvious debt to the academic theories of the past, *Graphics* was unique. As Peter Marzio has explained in *The Art


\(^{17}\) An extensive discussion of *Graphics* is in Peter Marzio's *The Art Crusade* (Washington, 1976). See also the two books by Carl Dreppard: *American Arts and Artists* (Springfield, 1942) and *American Drawing Books* (New York, 1946).
Crusade, and as Peale stated in his introduction, the pedagogy of Graphics was unabashedly populist. (In the 1842 edition, Peale altered the subtitle to read A Popular System of Drawing and Writing for the Use of Schools and Families.) Unlike previous drawing books, it was mass produced, meant for a young audience, intended to give a non-elite student access to the heretofore unavailable pleasures of drawing, and designed to be affordable, costing one dollar as opposed to the ten or twelve dollars for some earlier books. Most importantly, Graphics asserted, democratically, that anyone could draw and that drawing should have a central place in American primary education. As an excellent manifesto for the new mass education movement in America, Graphics was endorsed by the Controllers of the Public Schools of the First District of Pennsylvania, and Peale, who marketed the book ferociously, himself became Professor of Drawing at Central High School for eight hundred dollars a year.

The book was also special in its vanguard pedagogical theory. On page seven of the text, Peale credits Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, a Swiss educational philosopher, with influencing Graphics. As Marzio pointed out, Pestalozzi believed that drawing could be an essential aid to writing. Peale quotes Pestalozzi directly in his Preface: "The art of writing, to be taught consistently with nature, ought to be treated as subordinate to that of drawing, and to all its preparatory acquirements, especially the art of measuring." Expanding from Pestalozzi's premise, Peale revealed his conceptual framework and mimetic method:

When the principles of drawing are clearly understood, and have become familiar by practice, and before any attempts be made at writing, the student should draw, with point or pencil, the correct forms of writing, only as extended lessons in drawing. After the eye and judgment are satisfied, by repeated corrections and variations, what forms of letters are desirable, then, and not sooner, should the hand be trained to execute with fluency and facility, with pen and ink.

Peale's simple concept—that drawing was equivalent to writing—had educational and intellectual consequences larger than the stated

18 Rembrandt Peale, Graphics, 8.
goal of improved draftsmanship and calligraphy. For one thing, *Graphics* put the useful arts and the fine arts on the same plane. The necessity of marriage between the fine and useful arts was an idea often expressed by late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century writers and orators, most cogently in Peale's generation by DeWitt Clinton in an 1816 oration and most like Peale's conception by Philadelphian William Carey in an 1838 speech, "National and Commercial Utility and Profit of the Arts of Design." Peale spoke in an equally utilitarian and nationalistic way when he pointed out how Europe improved its manufacturing by stressing drawing in school: "these are advantages of national importance; because they are not confined to the individual immediately concerned, but their benefits necessarily extend through all classes of society."

When Peale essayed that "the language which is spoken by the draughtsman becomes the law and guide of the workman," he was clearly stressing a cognitive theory. What Peale proposed throughout *Graphics* was that the non-verbal, holistic, spatial facility used in creating linear forms in art—its elemental visual language—was identical to that used in mechanical and industrial design. Thus good drawing led not only to good writing, but also to an improved sense of design creativity that would improve technology and eventually the national well-being of every class. Though Peale did not argue this theory explicitly in *Graphics*, it was implicit in the text, and he would later cite Robert Fulton, Samuel Morse, his father and himself as examples of artists naturally turning to technology for the improvement of public welfare.

The second effect of the *Graphics* system was the way the cultivation

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of the eye, mind and hand, necessary for good drawing and writing, led to a cluster of aesthetic concerns that in turn had moral implications. If a student followed the Graphics program through the prescribed process of analytical thought and idealization, he would be indoctrinated into an aesthetic predilection for linearity, proportion, measure, symmetry, accuracy, harmony, simplicity and rationality. In the process of acquiring those aesthetic beliefs, he would also be developing a belief in discipline, grace, truth, excellence, industry, perseverance and honesty. Graphics could build good citizens.

The third implication of Graphics was more abstract and, in turn, most revolutionary. In claiming the functional equivalency between drawing and writing, Peale was merely noting a common dependence on hand/eye coordination. But as anyone trained in the system would come to believe, subliminally if not consciously, there was also a conceptual conjunction between drawing and writing. That is a huge philosophical leap, for it meant that now there was parallelism between graphic writing and pictorial construction, between flat pattern and spatial deployment, between two-dimensional calligraphy and three-dimensional illusion. And when each enterprise is taken to its functional goal, verbalization and pictorialization, both of which Peale demonstrated in Graphics, it meant a correspondence between words and images, between sequential thought and spatial thought. Peale seems to have understood, pre-consciously, that drawing and writing were both, at their cognitive root, semiotical projects. Split off from one another by conventional educational philosophy, Peale boldly rejoined them at the level of signs. Though it is difficult to identify the specific manifestations of a concept that allows for the convergence of writing and drawing, perhaps one can now appreciate in Thomas Eakins’s diverse drawings, made while a Graphics student at Central High School, the oscillation between calligraphic drawings and pictorial drawings. And one can now detect in his preparatory drawings and paintings of boating subjects and in the dialogue between image and frame in his Portrait of Professor Henry A. Rowland, the brilliant duality—the mutual, simultaneous, yet separately identified expression—of flat graphic form and pictorial illusion.24

24 Michael Fried addresses issues related to this in “Realism, Writing, and Disfiguration
Yet for all its vanguard Pestalozzian characteristics and its conceptual/social/moral implications, *Graphics* was, at its core, an extension of eighteenth-century academic theory. It was written and used in an era in which Reynolds’s aesthetics were in decline and being replaced by the aesthetics of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Horatio Greenough and John Ruskin. These new thinkers and the many influenced by them overturned the ideology of Peale’s generation for a fresh view of art. The near monolithic stress on rational order and ideal form that permeates *Graphics* was displaced in Emerson’s generation by a new aesthetic that embraced and celebrated the complex physical, emotional and spiritual vagaries of the natural world. The new aesthetics, articulated by 1835, existed, however, only in the orbit of intellectuals. As a result, not until the 1850s did they enter public dialogue and not until after the Civil War did Ruskin’s *Elements of Drawing* replace *Graphics* as America’s premier drawing book.25

Where *Graphics* was Peale’s effort to bring drawing into the mainstream of American life, his Lecture on the Fine Arts was an attempt to make the principles of art theory accessible to the masses. Delivered on the third of January, 1839, the Lecture inaugurated the New Lecture Room of the Philadelphia Museum, recently built by Isaac Holden.

As in the case of *Graphics*, the ideas forming the Lecture on the Fine Arts were eighteenth century in origin but popular in their tone and intellectual density. In his opening page, Peale openly calls it a “popular lecture” and goes on for over fifty manuscript pages to declare—not to philosophize or to inquire—what the fine arts are. They are, to Peale, painting, sculpture, architecture, engraving, music, drama and gardening—all which were called “beautiful” and “noble.”

Peale then assessed the current state of the arts in America and lamented the lack of a public gallery. But there were signs of artistic

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25 John Ruskin’s *Elements of Drawing* was first published in 1857. See Peter Marzio, *The Art Crusade*, 54-58 for a discussion of Emerson, Ruskin and their challenge to the art theory of Peale’s generation.
genius and of improved public taste in American architecture, a situation, Peale essayed, that would be "the natural precursor of Sculpture and Painting." Just as America possessed genius in the monuments of Philadelphia architects William Strickland, Benjamin Latrobe and T. U. Walter, so too were there models for future greatness in sculpture in the American work of Jean-Antoine Houdon, Antonio Canova, Francis Chantry, and Horatio Greenough. Curiously, Peale ignored fellow Philadelphian William Rush, and instead rambled into a lengthy discussion about developing domestic libraries of plaster casts after antique statuary. Again, the facsimile, whether it be in the form of plaster casts, Washington portraits, old master painting or eighteenth-century theory, emerges as the predominant instrument of Peale's populist ideology and as the modus operandi of his agenda for achieving cultural democracy. It is in his discussion of casts that Peale succinctly articulated his democratic ethic: "The original can be but in one place, while the casts, like the bounties of heaven, may be everywhere, and should not be the less valued because they may be more extensively enjoyed."

Turning to the subject of painting, Peale recast his familiar theme that culture was the domain of the many. "Painting participates in the character of the times":

In the early ages of painting few books were written to make known any of the principles of an art, whose professors were so strongly tempted by the love of fame, or the desire of wealth, to monopolize the advantages they possessed; and therefore whenever a youth manifested a genius for the beautiful art, it was a favour not easily purchased, to be received into the sanctuary of the heaven-lighted studio, to learn this art and mystery. In our times, without comparing their advantages with the golden days of Italy, the art of painting is much more extensively practiced; and most of the painter's mysteries have been promulgated by books and in the Schools of Artists; so that but few possess any technical knowledge that is confined to their own practice, and which they are unwilling to make common property.

The message here was concerned not merely with the democracy of

art and knowledge, but implicitly with the time-honored, almost obligatory rhetorical notion, frequently expressed since the Revolution, that America, because of its freedoms and egalitarianism, was destined to assume a central role in the future of Western art.

After painting, Peale discussed the idea of genius, which, in principle, could be the greatest threat to his doctrine of democratic art:

Genius, whatever may be its metaphysical or physiological nature—in whatever degree a young man may possess it—may be cultivated by education, enlarged by observation, refined by practice, and rendered more perfect by time and judgment.29

Here, as in many other junctures in his writing, Peale was trapped between two competing ideologies. Peale the eighteenth-century academician believed in genius and the idea that some individuals, because of the divine hand of fate and innate reasons, have greater talents than others. If one believed in technical perfection or penultimate beauty in art, as Peale and most eighteenth-century academics did, one must logically believe genius to be the agent of material perfection. On the other hand, Peale the cultural democrat believed visual expression available to everyone and that instruction and industry could overcome any deficiencies in talent. Moreover, in making genius a progressive state capable of being “cultivated by education,” Peale was reducing it to raw talent in need of the same structured pedagogy he was advocating for the amateur. To reinvoke the prefactory dictum of Graphics, all genius or amateur need do is “Try.”

When Peale returned to the subject of painting, he attempted to resolve the conflicts in his mind raised by the topic of genius by making a distinction between painting and the other more acquirable, less poetic arts, and by extension, between artist and amateur. Many of the skills used by a painter, he claimed, were “merely the mechanical part of the art, and may be acquired by many.” But, as Peale asserted in his most convincing and unabashed tribute to the miracle of illusionistic painting,

the accomplished artist must possess other qualifications of more difficult attainment—a more intimate knowledge of what constitutes truth and

beauty of form—the wavey grace that shrinks from affectation—the touches of character and the expressions of sentiment, that do not degenerate into distortion or the breadth of caricature—the force and harmony of colouring that range between the extremes of gaudy glitter and the hues of sober sadness—Anatomy that will suffer no distortion—Costume that may not confound distant nations and remote ages—Perspective that shall seem to divest the canvas of its flat and tangible surface, extend it into aerial space, cover it with groves and Palaces, and people it with multitudes;—These are the requisites of the Great Painter who will gain the applause of his Contemporaries, and command the veneration of posterity by the creations of his pencil.30

Peale concluded this celebration of the genius of the painter by praising the triumphant “powers” in the sculpture of the “sublime” Michelangelo, in the “classic pencil” of Raphael, in the “glow” of Titian’s paintings and in the “inspired” frescos of Domenichino.31 Using expansive rhetoric, Peale, at this point in his lecture, seems to be capitulating to his eighteenth-century self. He was forced to concede that greatness in art was irreducible to instructional recipes and representational habits, that it did not yield to mere descriptive explanation and that ultimately the amateur had no access to the kind of talent Peale’s eighteenth-century trained colleagues often described as “Divine.”

Unfortunately, as happens so often in the Lecture, Peale truncated his discussion of one topic to move on to another, disconnected one. Having reached a climactic point in his argument, he dropped the subject of genius in painting in order to survey the entire history of Western art. Only at the end of the Lecture did he parenthetically return to his central themes: the nation was on the threshold of a cultural awakening, and through education the arts will belong to everyone.

Peale’s Lecture on the Fine Arts was highly derivative. He undoubtedly knew of Samuel F. B. Morse’s Academies of Art lecture, which was published in 1827, and attended or at least knew the

31 Domenichino was especially attractive to Peale because of the Italian’s belief, in opposition to his stylistically flamboyant competitor Lanfranco, in imitation as the conceptual basis of art. Significantly, Ruskin attacked Domenichino’s pictures as “examples of evil”; see Peter Marzio, The Art Crusade, 56.
content of Morse's oft repeated Lectures on the Affinity of Painting with the Other Fine Arts. In imitating Morse, both in his paraphrasing of Morse's ideas and in using the lecture format, Peale was trying to spread the gospel of art to a mass audience. But where Morse, in his tightly argued, rhetorically compelling and intellectually subtle lectures, attempted to join painting with poetry and music on the pedestal of fine arts, Peale, despite his self-destructive rhetoric and inner ideological warfare, wanted to cut the pedestal down to human size, seeking to liberate the fine arts from the sheltered precincts of elitism.

Peale's public advocacy culminated in an unfinished project, his monumental Notes of the Painting Room. The Notes were an encyclopedia of information on the techniques of painting collected by Peale over his career, but not systematized until the mid-1840s after his retirement from Central High School. Never published and existing now in two manuscript versions in the Historical Society of Pennsylvania and the National Academy of Design, it was the unsung and virtually unknown masterpiece of Peale's career as a writer and educator. Peale seems to have covered every possible topic. There are long sections on equipment, materials, and pigments, and essays on lighting and on how to stroke in order to achieve various visual effects. He discussed methods and procedures of painting and the merits of copying; has sections on trouble-shooting (what to do if the paint cracks or the surface wrinkles); and even offers tips on the secrets of Thomas Lawrence's technique and on how to render the corners of the mouth.

As in his other works, Peale's raw ideas were derivative. He paraphrased and openly acknowledged the writings of many other artists, theorists and historians (for example, John Opie, Charles Eastlake, David Wilkie and Karel Van Mander). He also extracted and ac-

32 Samuel F. B. Morse, *A Discourse on Academies of Art* (New York, 1827). Morse's Lectures on the Affinity of Painting with the Other Fine Arts were delivered in 1826 but not published until 1984 by the University of Missouri Press, with an introduction by Nicolai Cikovsky, Jr. For more on Morse as a thinker and writer, see Paul J. Staiti, "Samuel F. B. Morse's Agenda for a National Art," in *Samuel F. B. Morse: Educator and Champion of the Arts in America*, exhibition catalogue, National Academy of Design (New York, 1982), 7-53.
knowledged information from earlier manuals of materials and methods, especially Pierre-Louis Bouvier’s *Manuel des jeunes artistes et amateurs en peinture*, which was translated and printed in America in 1845, from Jean François Mérimée’s *De la peinture à l’huile; ou, des procédés matériels employés dans ce genre de peinture depuis Hubert et Jean Van Eyck jus-qu’à nos jours*, translated by W. B. S. Taylor in 1839, from Robert Dossie’s *The Handmaid to the Arts*, first published in America in 1792, and from George Field’s *Chromatics: or The Analogy, Harmony and Philosophy of Colors*, published in London in 1845.³³

The use of these sources should not diminish the achievement of *Notes of the Painting Room*, for it was an heroic compilation of the most modern information on art and it was the first such book by an American. Written as Peale neared the age of seventy, it was his farewell work, and clearly he wanted to pass down his considerable knowledge to younger generations of artists and to make available to all “the Art and Mystery of Painting.” Always trying to demystify art with knowledge, Peale wrote that “the art of Painting is sufficiently difficult in all the circumstances of invention, composition, design, drawing, anatomy, perspective, light and shade, harmony, character and expression, without suffering by embarrassment and doubt in regard to the materials and mechanism of art.”³⁴ Peale felt that this knowledge was “as important to the most talented artist as good materials and tools and modes of using them are to the mechanic in the production of watches or steam engines.”³⁵ In this manuscript, Peale viewed all artists more as creative engineers than as high priests of aesthetics; genius and amateur alike must know the tools of the trade. Echoing the educational goal and populist philosophy of *Graphics* and the Lecture on the Fine Arts, Peale, in this final work, wanted to unlock the secrets of art: “It was seldom that a student could purchase or procure the means of learning what was then called the

³³ For more detailed information on technical manuals available in America, see Janice Schimmelman, “Books on Drawing and Painting Techniques Available in Eighteenth-Century American Libraries and Bookstores,” *Winterthur Portfolio* XIX (Summer/Autumn, 1984), 193-206.

³⁴ Rembrandt Peale, “Notes of the Painting Room,” unpaged.

³⁵ Rembrandt Peale, “Notes of the Painting Room,” unpaged.
'art and mystery of Painting,' for, much of it, in all ages, has been kept a mystery.  

It is ironic that Peale's unified body of ideas, written over twenty years, would be compressed into the form of memoirs—written as casual communications to young artists rather than as formal essays on art—and published serially after 1855 in *The Crayon*. In that new journal, Peale's final pronouncements on facsimile, imitation, beauty, public education and the past would be swiftly eclipsed by the new and challenging ideas of John Ruskin. In articles written by Ruskin and his battalion of young followers, *The Crayon* would become the most influential advocate of Ruskinism in America. Embracing the complexity of nature, rejecting rote imitation and challenging the authority of the past, Ruskinism engulfed Peale's antiquated beliefs in the old masters, in casts, in virtue and in the doctrine of "Try." Less absolute in its attitude towards beauty, truth, art and artistic method, more committed to sensation, nature and the individual creative act, Ruskin's aesthetics made Peale's seem too predictable, too unimaginative, too artificial, too anachronistic.

Peale must have known his time was drawing to a close. As early as 1841, only two years after Peale delivered his Lecture on the Fine Arts, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in *The Dial* that

> the power of Nature predominates over the human will in all works of even the fine arts, in all that respects their material and external circumstances. Nature paints the best part of the picture. ... [The artist] must work in the spirit in which we conceive a prophet to speak, or an angel of the Lord to act, that is, he is not to speak his own words, or do his own works, or think his own thoughts, but he is to be an organ through which the universal mind acts.

Peale might have been able, in 1841, to dismiss Emerson's transcendental aesthetics as radical, Unitarian-inspired heresy. But by 1855, when *The Crayon* committed itself to Ruskinian naturalism, Peale was self-evidently outmoded and, with his generation's decline, outnum-

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36 Rembrandt Peale, "Notes of the Painting Room," unpaged.
37 For an extensive discussion of Ruskinism in America, see Roger Stein, *John Ruskin and Aesthetic Thought in America, 1840-1900* (Cambridge, 1967).
38 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Thoughts on Art," *The Dial* I (January, 1841), 371-72.
bered too. Peale must have been appalled and deeply threatened when he read the words of Ruskin’s follower, William James Stillman, who was the founder and editor of The Crayon:

The quality which we term Beauty is the expression in matter of the nature or attributes of God, the form in which He manifests himself in His works.39

Not only would Stillman’s metaphysics have been alien to Peale, but his philosophical thinking and expression—his meditation on the cosmic origins of beauty—would be a de facto rebuke of Peale’s lifelong effort to demystify art.

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When seen against the engulfing new aesthetics of the mid-nineteenth century, Peale’s positivist writings seem like final and futile efforts to confirm for himself and to prove to others the now fading beliefs that sprang from his enlightenment education and democratic ethics. In some ways, writing itself was a signal of defeat. When he published Graphics in 1834, Peale’s imaginative pictorial powers were already in severe decline. As one looks over his late pictures—mostly discordantly colored parodies of his early work—only one picture, his riveting Self-Portrait of 1856, emerges as extraordinarily astute and moving. In it, Peale presents himself dignified, direct and isolated completely from any contextualizing or identity enhancing setting. Though this format is one he had used earlier, in self-portraits of 1828 and 1850, here modified it carries a more poignant charge. More frontal and rigidly centered, more locked into his non-referential space, he is at once proximate to the beholder and at the same time obscured, distanced and consumed by dusty shadows. Passive and transfixed, like Thomas Eakins’s 1890s portraits of intellectuals materially and spiritually disengaged from the Gilded Age, Peale’s self-image is a haunting requiem for his dying race.

Yet, even in the face of Ruskinism and his own artistic decline, Peale’s populist instincts had, by the 1850s, been proven correct. The growth of institutions like the American Art Union, the continued

39 The Crayon III (May, 1856), 129-30.
antebellum success of *Graphics* in the public schools, the multiplication of drawing schools, the chromolithography movement, and the democratization of aesthetic discourse were all testaments to Peale’s belief that high culture and democracy were not incompatible.

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