ESSAY REVIEW

The Continuing Creation of the Peale Legacy


Upon the death of Charles Willson Peale on February 22, 1827, the contents of his famous Philadelphia museum passed to his children; then, much of what remained was sold to Phineas T. Barnum, only, in 1850, to go up in smoke. It has rightly become commonplace to see in this abbreviated history evidence of bitter, inescapable irony. Peale so desired final authority over his collections, working throughout his life to shape his museum into a national institution of which the new United States could be proud, and yet his labor of decades fell into the hands of a crass commercialist and then flamed into ash. Without his powerful presence, the legacy Peale sought to leave for posterity slipped away, beyond his control.

The last two decades, however, offer a dramatically different story. As volume 4 of The Selected Papers appeared together with an impressive blockbuster exhibition on the Peale family (shown at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the M.H. de Young Memorial Museum in San Francisco, and the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington), it became clearer than ever that the legacy of Peale's work and life will endure for quite some time. The driving force behind these two daunting projects was the late Lillian B. Miller, and anyone interested in the burgeoning field of American studies is substantially in her debt for the compendious, wide-ranging materials she has made available. Peale himself would no doubt be most appreciative of her efforts. Indeed, one cannot help but think that if Miller had been alive during

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Peale’s life, the two of them together would have been able to gain President Jefferson’s support for the nationalization of the Philadelphia Museum—Barnum would have never had a chance to lose the collection to fire.

Volume 4 continues in extremely fine fashion the project of the Peale papers, marking the halfway point of the projected eight volumes. The series remains a model of careful, thorough scholarship, suffused with an editorial generosity and spirit of abundance that make the book an experience to savor. There are over eighty illustrations, ranging from the opening magisterial color frontispiece of *The Artist in His Museum* (1822) to Titian Peale’s sketch of a pocket gopher (1819) to a photograph of Peale’s box for dental equipment. Moreover, in addition to these illustrations, the editors continue their wonderful practice of frequently including facsimiles of the diagrams—of lenses, gas holders, museum banners—that the Peales drew directly into their letters. As in the previous volumes of the series, the explanatory notes are consistently helpful without in any way overshadowing the correspondence itself.

It is not to critique the presentation at all to say that the greatest pleasure comes from the richness of the characters of the Peales as revealed in their writings—the lives and personalities crackle with energy. For instance, the volume begins with Peale writing to Thomas Jefferson in early 1821, addressing at great length Jefferson’s complaint that his “stiffening wrist... gets worse” (p. 4). “About 14 years past, I was waken’d by severe pain in my foot, as I had frequently removed triffling pains by rubing the part effected—I now determined to make tryal of rubing although at the moment the pain was Tormenting to touch it—however I began to rub, first ligh[t]ly, Then more violently, (I mean with my hand) and continued it so long that all the pain was driven away, and I sleep the remainder of the night. in the morning I found my foot alittle swelled with redness on the Skin and totally free of pain. this was so satisfactory, that ever since I have been in the practice of driving away pain, whenever I have felt it, on my limbs or Body” (p. 3).

This passage is worth quoting at length not only because it offers a representative example of the admirable editorial policy of nonemendation, but also because one’s appreciation of the volume follows in large part from how one responds to such writing—which actually continues for many more lines as Peale describes the benefits a nightly rubbing can have on the entire body. “Now my Dear Sir may not such a practice be servicable to you,” he eventually asks Jefferson (p. 3).

How are we to read such a prescription? Do we see Peale anticipating massage therapy? Was Peale trapped by the limited medical knowledge of his era? Was he remarkably conscious of the condition of his body, proud of his ability to preserve his health? And what of the fact that he dispenses this prescription to a former president, one of the most famous, celebrated personages of his time?

At the start of volume 1 of *The Selected Papers*, the editors provide general answers to such questions. The history to be set out before us, we learn, “is for the
most part personal, characterized by domestic and familial concerns.” At the same time, “it possesses a significance beyond representativeness” (pp. xxv–vi). Lines like those quoted above give us a strong sense of this precarious balance between the “personal” and the “representative.” The family emerges before us, in all its complexity, as at once quirky and pioneering, typical and outrageous. It is a balance not to be resolved or fixed, but kept in play, left open for evaluation. Indeed, another virtue of *The Selected Papers*—volume 4 included—concerns the way in which the editors permit the documents to display the Peale family as real illustrious ancestors, in all their glory, with their oddities and obsessions left intact. One senses immediately that the “selected” of the title refers not to any covering or tidying up, no editing out of potentially unpleasant secrets, but, instead, the title refers simply to the overwhelming amount of available material.

Volume 4 encompasses the years 1821 to mid-1827. It begins with Peale’s decision to leave “retirement” on his Belfield farm in order to return as museum manager, and it concludes with his death in Philadelphia. The editors divide the documents into eight chapters, which usefully emphasize the restructuring and ultimate relocation of the museum, Peale’s devotion to dentistry, his lectures on natural history, the significance of Lafayette’s return to America, the family’s ongoing achievements in portraiture, and Peale’s late project of autobiography. But throughout, in the correspondence that crisscrosses generations, the central themes, understood broadly, remain close to the concern of the opening letter. Again and again, Peale dwells on preservation, seeking sound minds and bodies for both national and individual reasons.

On many occasions during these six years, the representative and the personal interestingly converge upon the corporeal, blurring the boundaries between individual and societal fitness. Peale describes, for instance, a moment during which his efforts at dentistry are thwarted by his need to hang *The Artist in His Museum*. “Had I then stoped the fire I might have saved many of the teeth, but at this time I was putting my Portrait in the Museum, and I thought there would be no further damage done by the fire as it was, but behold the black lead muffle melted on the teeth and sunk all togethler in a mass, melted the feltspar cemented all to entire ruin, and I got only one Tooth, yet the satisfaction of knowing the composition to be excellent comforted me, in the loss of teeth & furnace” (p. 187). Despite the setback, Peale continued with the teeth and took solace in the power of his commanding self-portrait.

Ultimately and fundamentally, he believed his work could unite the individual and the national, leading to the well-being of both. To paint efficiently becomes for him a sign of good health, and just as Raphaelle’s illness is, in his father’s mind, bound up with a stubborn commitment to still-life painting, Peale finds vitality and good health when he holds the brush. By drinking a little water and getting back to the canvas, he can conquer the error of, one evening, “rather mixing too much
Cream with my strawberries”: “It appears to me that we ought never to eat our food hastily because in so doing we do not mix with it sufficiency of Saliva, an essential ingregent [ingredient] to promote digestions and my experience proves that when any uneasiness occures after eating, the best mode of cure, is to drink a little water and moove about gently . . . . In this present instance using the water altho’ I continued my work of the pensel, and was soon releived, and continued with such rapidity that I almost covered in the whole picture” (p. 405). As if to tighten the connection between good health and proper painting, Peale outgrows his spectacles, finding that he can in his eighties paint better without his glasses. He boasts of this fact several times in the volume, proudly writing that “some of my friends tell me that I am the greatest curiosity belonging to the Museum, to see me still active, producing good works, even Painting without Spectacles better pictures that [than] at any other period in my life” (p. 153).

Throughout these post-farm years, Peale repeatedly cited a motto he had inscribed on one of his Belfield garden’s obelisks: “Never return an Injury, it is an Noble tryumph [triumph] to overcome evil by good!” (p. 43). This motto, which he wanted for his gravestone epitaph, seems aptly chosen when seen alongside the various injuries—of time, of society, of finances—which he strove to overcome with good works and good health. He struggled against all odds to keep his family well provided for, to sell his farm for a reasonable price, to make false teeth, to preserve the museum. In his last months, he traveled to New York, seeking, at age eighty-six, a fourth wife in the fifty-three-year-old Miss Mary Stansbury. When she refused his offer, he did not in any way return the “injury.” Though he literally caught his death of a cold on the way back to Philadelphia, he did more than turn the other cheek. He immediately set about making a set of artificial teeth for Miss Stansbury!

He urged the obelisk motto upon his friends and family, and they too seemed in need of it during these years, for all the Peales encountered injuries of some kind over which they tried in their own ways to triumph. Rubens, for instance, wrote to his father of museum troubles in Baltimore: “The cold week was a scene of distress amongst my live animals—The Alligator died, and I have preserved it in fine condition—The Goffer Turtle also died—The Otter wore his feet on the brick floor un[t]il they bled, And before I was aware of it he bled to death.—The Eagle broke his chain and in passing the Tiger Cat was caught by him and was instantly killed. Also a chicken which stood perpendicular faired the same fate” (pp. 205–6). In his next line, Rubens revealed his strong strain of can-do spirit, which must have cheered his father: “I have,” he wrote, “just completed a furnace for the purpose of warming the Animal room” (p. 206). Some of the better-known struggles detailed in these pages include Benjamin’s marital difficulties, Rembrandt’s famous pursuit of the standard portrait of Washington, Raphaell’s attempt to succeed as a son and a painter, and Titian’s quest for the posts and reputation he desired.

Throughout the volume, then, the family figures prominently, and to a certain
extent Peale himself does not exist without his family, which is truly the only collection in his life that rivaled his museum for his attention and care. Still, it would not be wrong to say that this volume, like the preceding ones, remains largely his, throughout all eight chapters. He is, as his friends rightly noted, the greatest curiosity, the wondrous spectacle sans spectacles. This recognition makes all the more sobering the inventory of personal property which, along with an obituary, concludes the volume. These final pages threaten to reduce Peale's vibrant life and work to a list of possessions as disparate as valises and old stockings.

Sir Hans Sloane, the famous collector who established the British Museum—exactly the sort of museum Peale sought to leave for his own country—asked that his funeral sermon be preached from the Ninetieth Psalm and the last verse of that psalm expresses the fervent hope for the endurance of human effort:

Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us,
and prosper for us the work of our hands—
O prosper the work of our hands!

This fourth volume of *The Selected Papers* offers strong assurance that Peale's work continues to prosper. And while volumes 5–8 might reveal that Charles Willson Peale is a very difficult act to follow, he is by no means fully gone. The next volume will feature the text of his autobiography.

In a letter to Henry James, Henry Adams once wrote that autobiography could offer a "shield of protection in the grave." Benjamin Franklin, a man closer to Peale's heart and time, wished that the act of autobiography could offer a chance of editing out lived errata. Such thoughts on the nature of one's legacy are relevant to the exhibition catalog for *The Peale Family: Creation of a Legacy, 1770–1870*, for as visually stunning and informative as it is, its contributors occasionally seem more interested in offering protection and idealization than in getting at the complexity of the Peale family so powerfully revealed in *The Selected Papers*. A glance at the table of contents suggests that this text bears certain similarities to the 1991 collection, *New Perspectives on Charles Willson Peale*, edited by Lillian B. Miller and David C. Ward. And, indeed, the catalog resembles that volume in its strengths and weaknesses.

David Brigham reviewed *New Perspectives on Charles Willson Peale* in these pages in 1992 (116: 2, 244–47), and he used that opportunity to assess the state of Peale criticism, declaring that "considerable hard work remains in the realm of interpretation." He called for "more theoretically informed readings, more socially and materially grounded interpretations, and a more scientifically sophisticated assessment of Peale's accomplishments." Following the review, Brigham published his own excellent, rigorously researched book, *Public Culture in the Early Republic: “
Peak's Museum and Its Audience (1995). This new exhibition catalog, however, is less successful at providing the sort of interpretations Brigham desired. In his 1992 review, Brigham went on to note that "the Peale literature offers the exciting possibility of opposing and conflicting interpretations, the presentation of which in this volume would have allowed a less unified but more critical and complex reading of Peale's life." Exactly the same can be said of The Peale Family catalog.

Nevertheless, perhaps Brigham's review sets the wrong expectations for an exhibition catalog, which needs to appeal to the general population. Without exception, each essay in the collection is informative and interesting. Lillian Miller's nearly one-hundred-page introduction provides thoughtful readings of many central paintings, while also offering a thorough, elegant overview of the Peales from 1735 to 1885. Of the ten, more standard-length, essays that follow, the strongest tend to be those that acknowledge the provisional nature of their interpretations. Sidney Hart's analyses of "Charles Willson Peale and the Theory and Practice of the Eighteenth-Century American Family," for instance, takes off from the point that, despite the abundance of information about the Peales now available, "[w]e do not know . . . what Peale and his wife talked about at meals, or if they spoke at all" (p. 102). Hart's attempt to fill in some of the "unrecorded" elements of the Peales' family life is provocative and insightful. When Kenneth Haltman, however, in his "Titian Ramsay Peale's Specimen Portraiture; or, Natural History as Family History," asserts that we ought to see in Titian's drawings of antelope and deer self-portraits that evidence Oedipal tensions, we wish he had been more provisional and more convincing. "The sense of visual blockage in Black-Tail Deer is given a psychological dimension by its resemblance to the gesture of ambivalent welcome in The Artist and His Museum. The deer, a hunting trophy and a tour de force of taxidermic reconstruction as well as surrogate self-portrait, similarly frames a realm of power and control, its stance in the western landscape functionally analogous and morphologically identical to that of Charles in his museum. Titian here emulates his father even while contesting his authority" (p. 193).

The rest of the essays fortunately do not form such tenuous links in an effort to establish a fixed—and all too predictable—legacy. David Steinberg nicely emphasizes our need to continue questioning the Peale legacy, closing his "Charles Willson Peale Portrays the Body Politic" with the statement that "the depicted body Peale left behind interrogates the world and its ideals for perpetuity" (p. 133). In addition, the handful of scholars who focus on the lesser-known members of the Peale family—Paul D. Schweizer on Rubens Peale, Linda Crocker Simmons on James Peale as well as Charles Peale Polk, and Anne Sue Hirshorn on Anna Claypoole, Margaretta, and Sarah Miriam Peale—are too busy shedding important light on previously under studied figures to fall into the trap of unconvincing legacy making. Indeed, these essays are the most successful responses to Brigham's review—they argue with care for divergence and difference as a central part of
Peale’s legacy. Two other strong contributions include William T. Oedel’s essay on Rembrandt and social reform, and David C. Ward’s closing essay on “Democratic Culture: The Peale Museums, 1784–1850,” which usefully unifies the family experience of museum making in Philadelphia, Baltimore, and New York.

Raphaelle remains a contentious figure in analyses of the Peale family—he is certainly the figure who has, in recent years, attracted the most alarming interpretations. Is he, as Phoebe Lloyd has argued, the murdered son? Is he, as Nicolai Cikovsky Jr. suggests (echoing Charles Coleman Sellers), “of all the Peales . . . the truest and the greatest artist” (Raphaelle Peale Still Lifes [1988], p. 33)? As is often the case, the answers probably reside some distance from such extreme positions. Still, one regrets that this catalog seems to skirt these issues—both in Brandon Brame Fortune’s essay on Raphaelle and in Lillian Miller’s introduction—avoiding direct conflict by focusing on Raphaelle’s financial and physical difficulties.

In the end, then, the catalog is well worth its price, and it serves as an excellent record of the most complete, most impressive Peale family exhibit to date. Interestingly, the last line of the video that played continuously at the exhibit proclaimed that the Peales gave “a human face to the ideas on which America was founded.” The statement is surely and deeply true. It is, however, ultimately in The Selected Papers that the “humanity” comes across most clearly—the catalog remains too pristine, too pointed towards hagiography.

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