

Charles Willson Peale's
The Artist in His Museum, 1822

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What could be more American than a polymath patriot whose love of perfection, possibly teetering on obsession, led him to become founder of America's preeminent museum of natural artifacts and portraits of national heroes? I am referring, of course, to Charles Willson Peale, America's own writer, politician, collector, and painter, among other pursuits. Whether driven by Enlightenment ideals of order, and classification, or simply by his own ambitious image, Peale began displaying and classifying everything a collection should contain, plant, animal, or mineral. Today one can see for oneself a summation of Peale's devotions and moral concerns in a celebrated self-portrait hanging in the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia. Within *The Artist in His Museum*, there lay an intimate map of the artist's ambitions and career in revolutionary times, and as often is the case in painting, a little greater understanding of the artist will provide the key for decoding this map. I submit that in this painting, the artist has done more than simply commemorate or record the earthly existence of his collection at a given point, but rather synthesized the personal and more general importance of this collection with the ideals of the Enlightenment, at a time when the new ideals of the nineteenth century were being formed. The resulting artifact, this painting, is a glimpse into Peale's sensibilities and the position he occupied in history.

Near the end of his life, at age eighty-four, Charles Willson Peale wrote nearly a thousand page manuscript chronicling his own life.¹ The autobiography at this time and in this context was nearly unheard of, as typical personal accounts of the time were written largely about the author's relationship with God, while Peale's stood out as a secular record of how he had built himself. This manuscript fit in well with Peale's large archive of literature, containing in addition to his autobiography his personal diaries, over two decades of correspondence, and

miscellaneous ephemera.ⁱⁱ Peale's manuscript is peculiar in that he wrote in the third person, providing a chronology of facts in lieu of personal reflection, and "treating himself as a subject for scientific scrutiny" as Ward puts it.ⁱⁱⁱ This motif is evident in Peale's artwork as well, in the descriptive, illustrative nature of his paintings that seek to explain the subject through careful study by the viewer. In this same time frame Peale was also in the process of creating a series of six self-portraits by commission, of which *The Artist in His Museum* is the final and most famous (Ill. 1).^{iv} Peale's constant recording of himself, visually and in writing, speak to his very strongly held belief in the improvement of oneself, as an American self-made man. His ego is evident in his vast array of pursuits, and even his ambitious naming of his seventeen children; Rembrandt, Titian, Raphaelle, just to name a few.^v This particularly potent man may have been driven, at least in part, by his humble beginnings as the son of a convicted felon and indentured servant to a saddle maker. The upwardly mobile Peale sought out a new life after a somewhat sour end to his contract, and stumbled onto painting.

In his early twenties, Charles Willson Peale had the opportunity to study in the studios of John Singleton Copley and John Smibert, after which he traveled to Philadelphia and confidently "acquired" his technical knowledge of painting materials from written manuals.^{vi} He began painting miniature portraits and found it difficult, in fact nearly impossible, to carry on as such in the environment of the colonies. Just before abandoning the pursuit, he was able to sell a portrait for twelve dollars, a sum that allowed him to narrowly avoid his debt for the time being.^{vii} Eventually Peale sought training under Benjamin West in London, where Peale would reluctantly remain for two years.^{viii} During his time there, Peale sat for his portrait with West, which was completed as a typical eighteenth century portrait, having less to do with faithful

observation and more to do with depicting the subject according audience or sitter's expectations.^{ix}

When Peale made his return to Annapolis in 1770, he began probably one of the most prolific careers in American portraiture, creating over 700 paintings in the two decades following his apprenticeship.^x Peale's style of painting departed from his English teacher's idealized historical paintings. In fact, as Stewart remarks, "West's influence is remarkable only for its absence in Peale's subsequent work".^{xi} Peale was unafraid to include the ugliest of features in his portraits, if he considered it to be characteristic of the face of the sitter, perhaps one the nobler traits a painter could have at the time.^{xii} Out of the nearly one thousand portraits attributed to Peale, there are at least 70 likenesses of George Washington, whom Peale knew personally, amongst other notable heroes of the American Revolution.^{xiii} From this vast body of work, we can draw some conclusions about Peale's style that help when examining *The Artist in His Museum* (Ill. 1). There is an obvious lack of training in anatomy in Peale's portraits, as well as a struggle with perspective, which is often resolved with a composition of a figure in the foreground and some recessed element in the background to create the illusion of space.^{xiv} Peale's interest in machinery led him in the pursuit for a perfectly natural representation through experiments with instruments like the Camera Lucida.^{xv} Peale also created a polygraph that could produce two identical letters, indistinguishable from one another, but his brush could never produce a new identical sitter, an issue that is at the very center of painting from impressionism onward.^{xvi} As Peale's success grew, he began a portrait gallery to house visual representations of the Enlightenment ideals and his contemporaries that embodied them. As Ward describes it, the gallery acted as "a double system, honoring by inclusion, condemning by omission".^{xvii} Contemporary critics though, would criticize Peale for the very thing he considered himself best

at in his portraits, determining the character of the individual. Peale's detractors, such as Philip Frenau, attacked Peale not only on his weaknesses in representational painting, but by accusing his idealized heroes of being brutish, corrupt politicians in reality, a view held by many dissenting citizens in a newly forged nation.^{xviii}

To fully understand *The Artist in His Museum* (Ill. 1), we must examine the museum and Peale's relationship to the collection. In 1786 Charles Willson Peale opened his museum, a result of obtaining Mastodon bones for study that brought such curiosity that Peale began collecting other specimens as well.^{xix} Expeditions in the North American western frontier brought new items to Peale, in addition to contributions from sea captains. The growing collection soon outgrew Peale's private gallery and was moved to a public space behind Independence Hall.^{xx} Peale published a guide in 1805 titled: "A Walk with a Friend Through the Philadelphia Museum, that counted at least 90 species of mammals and 700 species of birds, labled in multiple languages and arranged, of course, according to the Linnaean system."^{xxi} Peale thought it most appropriate to put the flying squirrels, ostriches, and bats between the birds and mammals, as observation at the time would probably lead one to see these as intermediary species between the two classifications.^{xxii}

The obsession with a totality of subject is at the core of what the Enlightenment was about, a mastery of knowledge, and what better way to master something than to contain it and label it. Collections appeal to this totality through the appearance of the display, and to this end Peale worked laboriously cataloging elements of every kingdom, animal, vegetable, and mineral.^{xxiii} The exhibits contained both living and taxidermy animals, including a live grizzly bear that escaped and was shot down by Peale himself.^{xxiv} Peale's very own excavated Mastodon bones from his 1801 endeavor were assembled in a full skeleton and finished with carved

supplements for the missing pieces, and called attention to the changing times as Mastodons become the first species accepted by science to have become completely extinct.^{xxv} The Philadelphia Museum was Peale's very own way of reaching a large public audience, and represented Peale's virtues. Unlike the practice of the British Museum or the Louvre, which aimed at admitting artists, men of science, and the upper class after a lengthy waiting period. Here, in Peale's museum, the philosophy was that of education for every citizen, which can be seen in the inscription of the tickets Peale created himself (Ill. 2).^{xxvi} The taxidermy displays were designed to draw the interest of the general population, and did not presume any previous knowledge in their individual labels and descriptions of the species.^{xxvii} The idea of this totality, or unity in the Enlightenment's terms, would be increasingly subject to question as the nineteenth century progressed.^{xxviii} Museums embody the conceived notions of what is important or relevant to education at the time they exist.^{xxix} The Philadelphia Museum was certainly this for Peale, and a number of others that follow from the museum's legacy. Hindle offers a few words on this legacy:

“Several systematic studies of American natural history appeared just before and just after Peale's death, all by members of the academy who had been heavily influenced by the museum. Thomas Say began in 1817 with the installments of his three-volume *American Entomology*, completed in 1828. This work bore the imprint of the museum and the impress of two generations of Peales.”^{xxx}

Now the topic at hand, *The Artist in His Museum* (Ill. 1), one of Peale's most emblematic works, that came near the end of his life during a period of self-chronicling. This fully realized, life size depiction of Peale in the midst of his life's work is a complex system of imagery chosen by the artist as a lasting memorial to his time on Earth. The painting itself was painted as a commission for the Philadelphia Museum's trustees, conveniently at a time when Peale was the head of the organization and when the public had a desire to honor the polymath.^{xxxi} While Peale

ordinarily prided himself on his ability to capture the essence of his subject quickly and without sketches, we have evidence of at least two preliminary studies for *The Artist in His Museum*.^{xxxii} This idea of a lasting image must have weighed heavy on Peale's mind as an eternal summation of his work and his virtues for the proud painter to make such unprecedented gestures, near the end of his life.

Let us begin to decode the painting through an analysis of its form, using what has already been said of Peale's style and his contemporaries. Peale's aforementioned device used to solve the problem of space is present again in this work, the figure fully lit projecting out from the painting, with a receding element in the background. The crimson curtain plays a large role in the painting, as a large protruding element that is held up by our gracious host, Peale himself. The curtain obscures some of the portrait gallery as well as the assembled Mastodon skeleton from Peale's excavation, as it also separates the audience from the rest of the painting. Objects that Peale includes with great emphasis are the crumpled turkey, an American bird and runner up as a symbol of the new nation to the bald eagle (featured prominently in the top case nearest the entrance to the gallery), as well as the mandible and tibia of the great Mastodon, a symbol of Peale's attempted showmanship to draw a wide audience to his "world in miniature".^{xxxiii} In addition to these animals in various stages of decay and preservation, near Peale's artistic left hand are his brushes and palette, his very own utensils for the preservation of nature through memorializing it on canvas. In the background, behind the dramatic revealing by the artist, visitors are seen observing nature and being quite astonished by the displays of these curious specimens. Returning to Peale, his stance is reminiscent of the way he portrayed many of the founding members of the nation, including George Washington himself.^{xxxiv} While Peale presents himself here in the pose of a sovereign it is not to usurp any of the persons he had

previously painted this way, but as a visual cue that this museum, *his* museum, was what he presided over. In Ward's *Celebration of Self*, are Charles Willson Peale's own words on the portrait:

“I wish it may excite some admiration, otherwise my labor is lost, except that it is a good likeness.”^{xxxv}

Peale's desire for admiration was not the only goal in creating this symbolic summary of his many pursuits. He felt that if people were able to decode the subtlety of his composition, they would understand the greater order and unity of the world, revealed by this representation and the Enlightenment ideals for which he was known.^{xxxvi} One subtlety of this painting is the creation of the fictional entry to the gallery, divided from the audience by this crimson drapery. Peale invented this separation as a dramatic device to fashion himself as a “cultural gatekeeper” of sorts, presenting us with *his* labored organization of displays and exhibits.^{xxxvii} This inflated view of the self, emphasized in his stature and literal enlarging of the torso, speaks to Peale's concept of his own identity.^{xxxviii} Just as the portrait includes the examples of Peale's labors and interests, it also important what it excludes. Peale's glasses are nowhere to be seen (and allegedly were not used during the painting of the portrait) despite his age he did not want to be taken as having any weaknesses.^{xxxix} It is also known that Peale was somewhat self-conscious of his lack of “specialization” in one area of expertise, a view shared by his family.^{xl} Peale concluded that his interest in so many arenas, in the end, limited his development as a master of any specific trade.

All of these elements, when added together in this composition, create a drama between not only Peale and the objects in the painting, but between Peale and the audience. His position as “arbiter of culture”^{xli}, inviting us to look and learn from his museum, but never unveiling the gallery entirely, creates a tension that never allows the viewer to resolve the painting ultimately

as a simple invitation. Peale's use of a grid in the receding cases of taxidermy specimens, respectively are a combination of a subtle and rather obtuse representation of man imposing himself on nature.^{xlii} The perfect grid is not natural, but a convention created by humans in an attempt to make order from the disorder of nature, and the taxidermy is easily read as man's literal cataloging of fauna.

The life of Charles Willson Peale is decipherable from *The Artist in His Museum* not as the result of some psychoanalysis of unconscious decisions on the part of the artist and subject, but because he *intended* the painting to do this very task. It is evident that Peale's hope for this work, as has been discussed, was to provide the viewer with an explanation of his virtues, and inspire the audience to share the Enlightenment values he clung to near the end of an era.

When the pieces of Peale's painting are no longer a cryptic assemblage of bones, taxidermy displays, and portraits, but decoded for what they represented to Peale and to the historians who have studied him, they come together so that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. *The Artist in His Museum* has been revealed as more than simple documentation, but as a source of commentary on the Enlightenment and the notion of the museum. This painting has been rendered with a new context after being colored by nearly two hundred years of separation between its current and original audience, and can now be looked upon as much more than a naturalistic representational portrait.

Notes

ⁱ David C. Ward, *Charles Willson Peale: Art and Selfhood in the Early Republic* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), xvii.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid., xx.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Ibid., xxiii.

^{vi} Ibid., 24.

^{vii} Ibid., 25.

^{viii} Ibid., 30.

^{ix} Ibid.

^x Hugh Howard, *The Painter's Chair: George Washington and the Making of American Art* (NY: Bloomsbury Press, 2009), 72.

^{xi} Susan Stewart, "Death and Life, in that Order, in the Works of Charles Willson Peale,"; *The Cultures of Collecting*, Ed. John Elsner and Roger Cardinal. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 208.

^{xii} James Thomas Flexner, *America's Old Masters*. Rev. ed. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1980), 190.

^{xiii} Howard, *The Painter's Chair*, 244.

^{xiv} Ward, *Charles Willson Peale*, 54.

^{xv} Ibid., 56.

^{xvi} Ibid.

^{xvii} Ibid., 58.

^{xviii} Megan Walsh, “*The Politics of Vision: Charles Willson Peale in Print*,” *Early American Literature* 46.1 (2011), 89.

^{xix} Brooke Hindle, et al. *Charles Willson Peale and His World*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1982), 80.

^{xx} Ibid., 81.

^{xxi} Ibid., 86.

^{xxii} Philipp Blom, *To Have and to Hold: An Intimate History of Collectors and Collecting* (Woodstock, NY: The Overlook Press, Peter Mayer Publishers, Inc., 2002), 93.

^{xxiii} Stewart, “*Death and Life, in that Order*”, 206.

^{xxiv} Ibid., 207.

^{xxv} Blom, *To Have and to Hold*, 93.

^{xxvi} Ibid.

^{xxvii} Sidney Hart & David C. Ward, “*The Waning of an Enlightenment Ideal: Charles Willson Peale’s Philadelphia Museum, 1790–1820*”; *Journal of the Early Republic* 8.4 (1988), 27.

^{xxviii} Ibid., 31.

^{xxix} Susan Pearce, *Museums, Objects and Collections: A Cultural Study* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), 89.

^{xxx} Hindle, *Charles Willson Peale and His World*, 126.

^{xxxi} Ward, *Charles Willson Peale*, 156.

^{xxxii} Ibid., 161.

^{xxxiii} Ibid., 163.

^{xxxiv} Ibid.

^{xxxv} Ward, “*Celebration of Self: The Portraiture of Charles Willson Peale and Rembrandt Peale, 1822-27*”; *American Art* 7.1 (1993), 9.

^{xxxvi} Ward, *Charles Willson Peale*, 163.

^{xxxvii} Ibid.

^{xxxviii} Ibid., 174.

^{xxxix} Ibid., 175.

^{xl} Hindle, *Charles Willson Peale and His World*, 109.

^{xli} Ward, *Charles Willson Peale*, 164.

^{xlii} Ibid, 180.