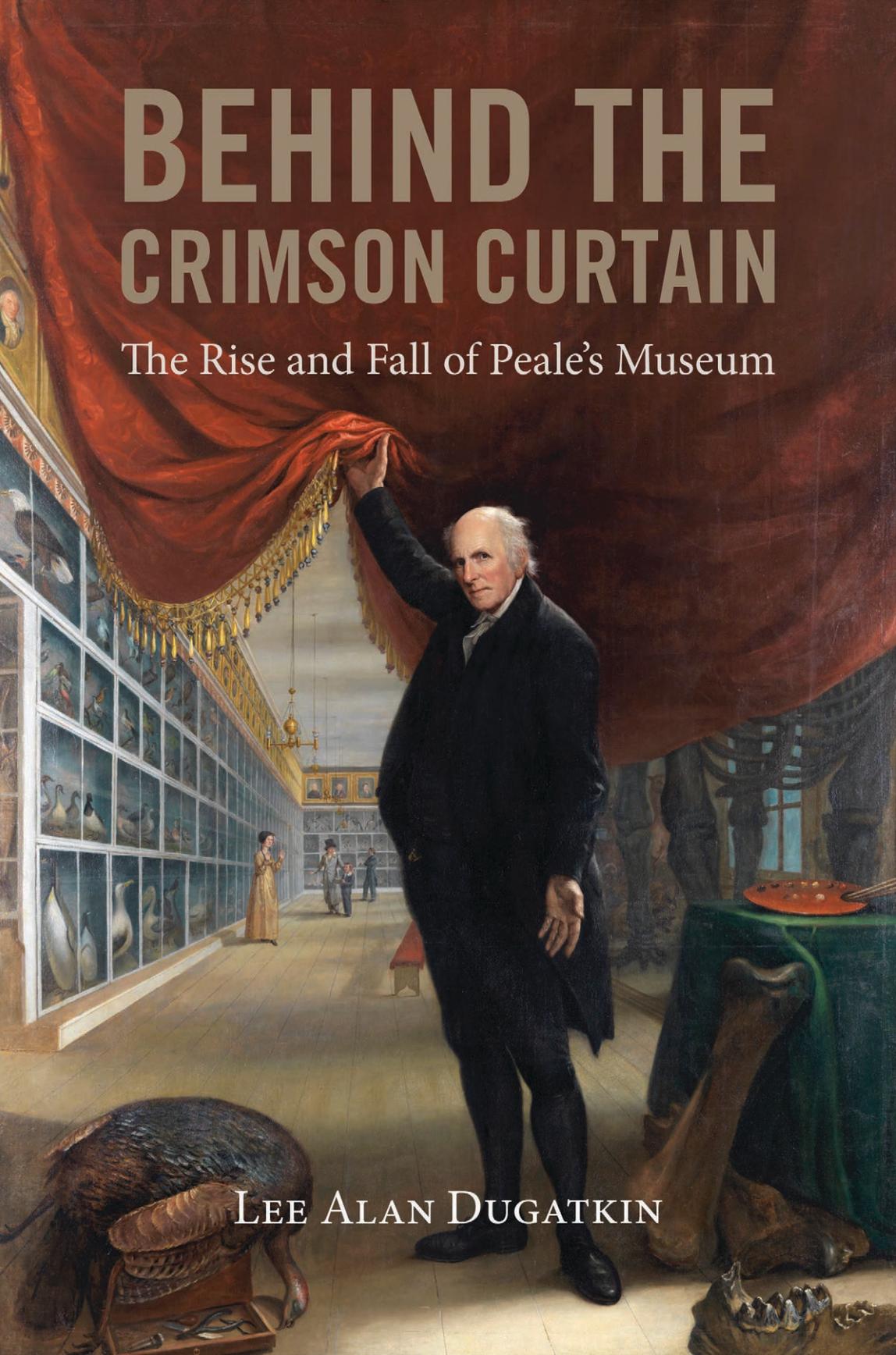


BEHIND THE CRIMSON CURTAIN

The Rise and Fall of Peale's Museum



LEE ALAN DUGATKIN

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PREFACE

If You Seek His Monument, Look Around

I SUPPOSE YOU HAVE SEEN MY ADVERTISEMENT
RESPECTING MY INTENTION OF APPROPRIATING A PART OF
MY HOUSE FOR A REPOSITORY OF NATURAL CURIOSITIES.
PERHAPS YOU COULD PROCURE THE STUFFED SKIN OF AN
ALLIGATOR . . .

— CHARLES WILLSON PEALE TO DAVID RAMSAY,
OCTOBER 15, 1786

In the six decades following this letter, Charles Willson Peale, widely regarded as one of the premier artists of the American Revolutionary era, would create the most important and most famous museum in America. A fusion of natural history and art, Peale's Philadelphia Museum was meant to be an embodiment of the Enlightenment. Over time it would grow exponentially, bringing into its orbit almost every scientific, political, and celebrity persona of the day. The story of this museum provides a unique window into the ethos of science, art,

and the Enlightenment in the early republic, and how these fed the appetites of a public hungry for rational entertainment. In many ways, Peale and his museum shaped the public's sense of what made for an enlightened citizen.

Peale the artist painted at least 18 self-portraits over the course of his lifetime, but none capture him quite like his signature 1822 painting, *The Artist in His Museum* (see book cover). This was a self-portrait in the truest sense, for by this time, 81-year-old Peale and his 36-year-old museum had fused, both in his mind and in that of the public. The trustees of his museum had commissioned him to do the work. After a seven-week burst of octogenarian energy, he produced a nearly nine-foot-tall by seven-foot-wide oil painting on “fine Russian sheeting” that hung in the museum by the first week of October.

The Artist in His Museum was designed to do more than just embody the man and his museum. It was meant to capture the psyche of the early citizens of the new republic, to convey the gestalt of natural history and its marriage to rational entertainment, and to put it all on canvas. Peale wrote his son, Rembrandt, that he “should not only make it a lasting monument of my art as a painter [but] be expressive [so] that I bring forth into public view, the beauties of nature and art, the rise and progress of the museum.” Peale’s self-assessment that his “portrait in the museum is much admired” would prove to be a grand understatement. Over time, *The Artist in His Museum* became one of the most recognizable paintings of America’s earliest homegrown artists.¹

The museum would have five homes after its 1786 birth, but Peale

situated *The Artist in His Museum* in the “Long Room” of the museum when it was located in the Pennsylvania State House (1802–1827), in what today houses Independence Hall. It was there, one floor below the Long Room, that the Declaration of Independence had been signed and that the Second Constitutional Conventional had burned hot. And it was in the belfry atop the Long Room that each day, a bell inscribed “Proclaim Liberty Throughout all the Land unto all the Inhabitants Thereof” would ring. Peale understood that if there was one spot that symbolized the history of the nation, brief though that history was, it was this building. In principle, he could have situated *The Artist in His Museum* in any of the former locations of the museum, including his home or the halls of the American Philosophical Society. However, it would be in the Long Room in the State House that he and his museum would go to canvas, burning an indelible association between the two into the minds of future generations.

Employing a device he had built to facilitate one-point perspective, Peale set brush to canvas, writing his son, “I wish it might excite some admiration.” He places himself in the front of the room with the light shining behind him for maximal effect, dressed in a black suit and white cravat, and lifting a magisterial crimson damask curtain with a calculated dash of the theatrical. Peale then unveils the Long Room of his museum to the viewer. In front of him, and to the left, lies a turkey—the animal Benjamin Franklin had argued should symbolize the new republic—atop a taxidermist toolkit that a Creator-like Peale will wield to breathe new life into this lifeless specimen for museum visitors. To his immediate right is a table covered by a green velvet throw, atop of which sits a painter’s palette, with paints and brushes,

hinting at the other tools of the trade that Peale and his sons used to make the museum an Enlightenment shrine of sorts.²

Leaning against the table is the giant femur bone of a mastodon placed near a piece of mastodon jaw. As the eye travels back behind the crimson curtain and along the north wall of the room, we see hints of a fully reconstructed mastodon. This creature was the most famous the museum ever housed. Peale and his sons had excavated it two decades earlier from a marl pit on John Masten's farm near Newburgh, New York, in what was both the first-ever large-scale paleontological expedition and the first museum-sponsored research project in America. The mastodon skeleton really sat in its own area adjacent to, but not part of, the Long Room, but, for effect, Peale placed it behind the curtain, partially revealed, along the north wall. To do so, he needed to omit William Rush and Jean-Antoine Houdon's sculptures that sat atop display cases lined with minerals and insects and dispense with the organ that was used for evening outreach events at the museum—all of which actually sat along that north wall. It was a cost he was willing to pay, for it was unthinkable that the mastodon be absent from *The Artist in His Museum*. It had not only become the symbol of American power and grandeur, but the reconstructed skeleton and the well-known story behind it—which included a doppelgänger mastodon that took a brief tour of Europe—made it clear that this museum was no static repository, but instead a dynamic research enterprise.³

As viewers travel down the left (southern) wall in the painting, they are treated to four long rows of display cases set under 19- by 22-inch portraits of eminent men of the era, each mounted in an oval frame. The display cases are a sample, albeit a small sample, of the

PREFACE

animals housed in Peale's museum, each carefully mounted and set with a hand-painted panorama of its native habitat. The cases provide a sense of the ordered, hierarchical way that life was represented at the museum. The one-point perspective used in *The Artist in His Museum* limited the space Peale had to lay out his view of the world, but even within the four rows of birds presented, the viewer sees the rapacious, glorious eagle sitting above songbirds, seabirds, and the like. Man sits atop that world, below him the animals. Peale the deist may not have believed that a supernatural force was actively maintaining order, but there was order nonetheless, an order that he often praised.

To make the Long Room appear more welcoming, Peale was comfortable taking more minor liberties. The rope barrier in front of the bottom cases to keep visitors from touching the displays was removed. In the glimpse we are given into the doorway in the foreground, Peale, in deference to the temple he built nearly 40 years before, has removed the artifacts that sat there, and replaced them with a paddlefish that was the first specimen donated to the museum.

Halfway down the southern wall, the viewer is again reminded of the mastodon across the room, as a Quaker lady, bonnet atop her head and both hands lifted, looks at the great beast in sheer awe. Behind her stand a father and son, as well as a contemplative young gentleman with arms folded, doing a bit of indoor bird watching. In these four, Peale captured the breadth of visitors to his museum, male and female, young and old. Apropos for the Enlightenment ethos of the museum, the boy holds a guide to the museum in his hands, and his attentive father has one arm around him, while the other arm points, in professorial-like fashion, at the display cases. Both gaze at the wonders before them.

If a painting can ever truly capture a man and what he created, then *The Artist in His Museum* does so. It is the artistic rendition of the epithet for Sir Christopher Wren on the walls of the London St. Paul's Cathedral that he designed: "Si monumentum requiris, circumspice" — "If you seek his monument, look around."⁴

CHAPTER 1

THE BIRDS AND BEASTS WILL TEACH THEE

Peale family legend has it that Charles Willson's father, Charles, attended Cambridge University, though no record of this exists. We do know that Charles Peale the elder was born in England in 1709 and was schooled for a life in the ministry, but rather than taking the path to the pulpit, he became a clerk. He eventually rose to the position of deputy director of London's General Post Office. Things did not go well. In 1735, he was charged with forgery and theft of nearly £2,000 from the postmaster general. He pleaded guilty and was sentenced to death by hanging. That sentence was commuted to exile in the North American colonies, where Charles first landed in Virginia before settling in Maryland and marrying Margaret Triggs. As a schoolmaster at the Kent County School, Charles taught Greek, Latin, mathematics, navigation, and surveying. He tried, unsuccessfully, to publish his book, *An Essay towards Rendering the Rudiments of the Latin Tongue*. Somewhere along the way, he became

acquainted with Benjamin Franklin.¹

In an autobiography that he penned in the third person, Charles's son and namesake, Charles Willson Peale, writes that he was born in Queen Anne County, Maryland, on April 16, 1741. The house where he spent his early years was modest, furnished with eight chairs, two chests, a couch, a table, and a corner cupboard. Charles Willson remembers his father as a man "greatly respected; but his income was low: as is too generally the case with teachers." In 1750, nine-year-old Charles Willson and his four siblings, James, Margaret Jane, St. George, and Elizabeth, lost their father, and their mother, Margaret, was left a "widow to support five children by her industry alone." Soon Margaret moved the family to Annapolis where she made ends meet as a seamstress specializing in cloaks and gowns.²

In 1754, Charles Willson was apprenticed as a saddler to Nathan Waters, a Philadelphian, who had settled in Annapolis. He learned his trade quickly and was fortunate that he had a master who paid him for each of the saddles that he made above and beyond what Waters took to be a fair lot for an apprentice. Peale eventually scraped together enough money to buy a watch and when it broke a second time, he tried, quite unsuccessfully, to fix it himself, but along the way "acquired knowledge of the principles of such machines," which would serve him well in the future.³

When he was 17, Peale took a trip across a tributary of the Chesapeake Bay to visit his friend John Brewer. John's 14-year-old sister Rachel greeted him at the door and Charles was instantly smitten. "Hail, rain, or snow," he wrote, "no weather deterred him from crossing South River and a creek every week to visit" this young woman whose

brown hair “hung in curling ringlets upon her long beautiful white neck . . . her face a perfect oval . . . her nose straight with a few angles, such as painters are fond to imitate.” He soon asked Rachel’s mother, Eleanor, for her daughter’s hand, and after some cat-and-mouse games, the coquettish Rachel agreed. On January 12, 1762, with a Reverend Barkley presiding over the ceremony, 21-year-old Charles and 17-year-old Rachel were married: in time, they would have 11 children together, six of whom would survive childhood. Their first, Margaret Jane, was born in 1763, and died before she turned two weeks old.⁴

Peale’s apprenticeship had been set at eight years and during the penultimate year, an opportunity arose to cut it short by four months. Waters was ill and told Peale of his plans to sail to Bermuda for convalescence, promising him that if he would take over all the operations during his absence, upon his return, Waters would release him from his apprenticeship four months early. Charles jumped at the opportunity, but Waters reneged on the agreement and tried to hold him to the full term. Peale would have no part of it, and in a brash move, went to Charles Wallace, a man “who had considerable influence with his master” and told him what had occurred.⁵

Wallace made things right and soon the apprenticeship was over. “How great the joy!” Peale wrote, “how supreme the delight of freedom! It is like water to the thirsty, like food to the hungry.” With his newfound freedom, he secured a loan of £20 from James Tilghman, a family friend, and in the January 21, 1762, edition of the *Maryland Gazette* announced the opening of his own saddle shop. In a bizarre twist, Peale received a letter soon thereafter from Captain J. Digby, a Brit claiming kinship, informing him he should sail overseas to claim

an inheritance from his father's estate. He had no knowledge of such a cousin, and though he did reply to the letter, he did not have the means to pursue the matter, which turned out for the better as the letter was a forgery. Peale came to think it was sent by local saddlers and "was framed for the design to prevent [him] from settling at Annapolis as an opponent in trade."⁶

Peale had a fondness for drawing and painting that was sparked, in part, by a sketch he had made as a young boy of Adam and Eve and the mythical tree of knowledge. When he was a bit older, an uncle died, and his grandmother, sensing a precocious artist-in-the-making, had Peale draw a sketch of the dead relative. But painting and drawing remained a hobby, and one only dabbled into on rare occasions. That changed when Peale made a sortie to Norfolk, Virginia, to acquire some leather. There, while he was visiting the brother of a friend, Peale came across some paintings the man had drawn. "They were miserably done," he recalled, but "had they been better, perhaps they would not have led [me] to the idea of attempting anything in that way." The seed was planted, and with "the idea of making pictures now having taken possession of his mind," Peale painted a few landscapes that his friends and family liked and followed this by a self-portrait with a disassembled clock before him, a portrait of Rachel, and another of his siblings. Word spread and soon Peale received his first commission: £10 to paint a Captain Beriah Maybury and his wife. He was beginning to think that he "possibly might do better by painting, than with his other trades." He took the first step in that direction by opening a sign-painting business, but from the start, saw himself as a budding portrait and landscape painter, doing signs to make ends meet.⁷

At the time, there were only four portrait painters in Annapolis, including Gustavus Hesselius and his son John Hesselius. Even though competition was scarce, Peale had a rough go of it at the start. He was, by his own admission, a rank amateur. He was even at a loss to know what colors to purchase at paint stores, as he “only knew the names of such colors as are most commonly known,” and had never worked with an easel or a palette “and therefore had his own inventions to supply these conveniences.” But he tinkered and experimented. An autodidact, he also purchased or borrowed books, including Robert Dossie’s 1758 *The Handmaid to the Arts*, which he took home and read straight through in four days “with very little intermission.” He also devoured Hogarth’s *The Analysis of Beauty*, De Fresnoy’s *De Arte Graphica*, and, most likely, Joshua Reynold’s *Discourses*. He even went to John Hesselius and traded him his finest saddle for a bit of instruction that included finishing the other half of a portrait that Hesselius had begun. Soon painting became Peale’s primary profession.⁸

Charles seemed eternally in debt, a consequence, as he saw it, of his inveterate dabbling, leading him into endless side industries, including clock repair. His debt became more dangerous when, in the Maryland elections of 1764, he took political sides with Samuel Chase, the anti-propriety, trade party candidate running against George Steuart, the landed, aristocratic court candidate. In retribution, Steuart’s supporters had four writs served against Peale on account of his debts. Charles and Rachel then slipped out of Annapolis, but soon enough the authorities tracked him down. When the sheriff discovered his whereabouts, “so narrow was [my] escape,” Peale wrote, “[I] then found it necessary to tear [my]self from [my] fond wife and friends.”⁹

For the next year, with pregnant Rachel staying with her family, Peale was on the run, first in Virginia, where he stayed for a brief stint with in-laws, and then joining one of those in-laws, Robert Polk, on a “lonesome disconsolate journey” aboard a ship to Boston in the summer of 1765. There, he likely joined in protests against the Stamp Act, or, at the very least, witnessed such protests. Polk lent him £16 for room and board, and Peale picked up some extra money painting portraits of local families. In Boston, he met John Singleton Copley, who but three years older than Peale, already had a reputation as a major portrait painter. Charles described Copley’s studio as “a great feast” to the eyes, and he dined with Copley on at least one occasion. These interactions appear to have spurred him to paint his first miniature, a self-portrait.¹⁰

Though he received an occasional commission, work was hard to find in Boston, and after briefly considering a stint in South Carolina, Peale headed back to Virginia. When his ship docked at Metompkin Inlet, a local judge, James Arbuckle, came on board, and in the course of events, spotted one of Peale’s paintings hanging in a cabin. Arbuckle was impressed and took an immediate liking to the artist as well as his art. The judge commissioned him to do a series of family portraits, and insisted Peale reside with him during his time in Virginia. In return, during his stay, Peale taught the judge the art of watch mechanics and a bit of silversmithing. Eventually, Arbuckle arranged for Peale to be able to return to Annapolis and join Rachel, who had made her way back there, on the promise of his making good on his debts within four years. When Peale returned, he was introduced to his baby son, James, and immediately took again to painting as his main profession. After