Exhuming Peale

Charles Willson Peale: Art and Selfhood in the Early Republic

In November 1817, the portraitist and museum proprietor Charles Willson Peale urged his wayward son Raphaelle to “act the man.” Raphaelle was a perpetual disappointment to his father; prone to wandering, illness, and mischief, and embracing the lowly genre of still-life painting over the public work of portraiture, Raphaelle failed Peale’s expectations as a husband, father, son, and artist. Peale wanted his eldest child to be more like him—or at least, as his advice suggests, to *act* that way. Peale always chose his words carefully.

In this instance he betrayed something about the way he led his own life: as a sequence of highly self-conscious performances, a never-ending process of self-invention. Peale's own lifelong effort to "act the man" is the subject of David Ward's compelling new book.

It has become increasingly difficult to say something new about Charles Willson Peale. Like other public figures of the founding era, Peale—together with his famous Philadelphia Museum—has been the subject of numerous books, essays, exhibitions, and dissertations. Microfiche and print editions of Peale's archive have helped make much of this scholarship possible: the Smithsonian's Peale Family Papers, where Ward serves as historian and deputy editor, has to date released five volumes of Peale's letters, journal entries, broadsides, pamphlets, and autobiographical manuscripts.

Ward, who has previously written several articles on Peale, here intends to offer a "biographical interpretation of his life and art" as opposed to an "empirically all-encompassing biography" (xxii). One may ask, what's the difference? Aren't all biographies interpretive and inevitably partial, the result of authors' decisions of what to include and omit, emphasize or gloss? Where Ward departs from an "all-encompassing" model (presumably meaning a fact-driven, great-moments approach) is in refusing to take Peale at his word. Instead, he evaluates Peale's writings and pictures against the often contradictory record of Peale's actions, and, in the gaps that emerge, he locates Peale's efforts to construct a persona. *Personas*, actually: Peale famously made and remade himself as a painter, soldier, politician, naturalist, educator, father, husband, and, in establishing a museum, cultural arbiter. Throughout, Ward argues, Peale struggled to reconcile "opposing impulses of appetite and restraint" (xxiii), or, as Freud would have it, the id and the ego. Although Ward does not subject Peale to Freudian psychoanalysis, Freudian theory does seem to inform the attention he devotes to identifying and understanding Peale's drives, desires, perceptions of lack, and self-imaginings. At the same time, Ward fully considers how Peale was shaped by his external worlds, including the class system of Chesapeake planters, social hierarchies of "artist" and "artisan," Enlightenment notions of family, and the political radicalism of republican ideology.

Ward's book is organized in three parts. Although the structure is loosely chronological, each section also explores and synthesizes certain thematic issues. Part 1, "[W]hy Not Act the Man [?]," examines Peale's early life and art through the 1790s, devoting particular attention to matters of family: the negative example set by Peale's father Charles, a convicted forger exiled to the colonies; Peale's own determination to forge his way into Tidewater society and find a wife; and Peale's self-invention from saddler's apprentice to London-trained portraitist. Part 2 is entitled, "I Scru[t]inize the Actions of Men," but it could just as well be called "Peale's Self-Scrutiny," for it interrogates Peale's obsession with health, hygiene, discipline, labor, and bodies (his body as well as the abstract body of the republic). Chapters 5 and 6 are especially persuasive and original. Here Ward connects the dots of

Peale's seeming eccentricities—his fixation with the merits of enemas, his preoccupation with speed and efficiency—to show how Peale subjected his private and public selves, not to mention the people around him, to programs of reform. Part 3, "It Would Seem a Second Creation," investigates Peale's autobiography, late paintings, and self-portraits (six produced between 1821-24!). Reading Peale's portraits of families—his own and his patrons'—against each other, Ward sees Peale struggling to articulate and project patriarchal authority. Likewise, in *The Artist in His Museum*, which pictures Peale lifting a curtain onto a fictionalized view of his main gallery, Ward detects unresolved tensions of self-display and self-concealment. Ward has much earlier scholarship to reckon with in analyzing this painting, yet he reinterprets the figures within the image in novel, if initially startling, ways: Peale reveals himself as a "killer" in highlighting his taxidermy tools and a stuffed turkey (170); somewhat less persuasively, his form is linked in a "bluntly sexual" way to the Quaker woman behind him, who may or may not represent, as Ward suggests, a coded reference to Peale's third wife Hannah Moore and the nature of their intimate relations (186-187).

One of the strengths of this book is that Ward gives equal consideration to the historical evidence of text and image, reminding us that portraits are not just cultural commentary, but are in fact culture itself (57). In addition, he reframes Peale's artistic accomplishments in refreshing ways. Ward imaginatively recreates the material circumstances of colonial portraiture, suggesting how climate or the artist's self-conscious entry into a great house may have influenced his working processes. He also contends that an emerging revolutionary consciousness helped inform Peale's decision, about 1771, to begin working in a naturalistic style—to paint from the "rude line of nature." The point is important, if underemphasized: Ward misses an opportunity to refute the tenacious art-historical trope that American "realism" was an aesthetic born of necessity and spirit, a mode of representation that reflected Puritan plainness and pragmatism. Elsewhere, he takes the fact that Peale seldom wrote about his art to mean that the artist was "uninterested in the mechanics of painting"—a point contradicted by Peale's fascination with perspective machines, his construction of extra-long brushes, and his experiments, together with his son Rembrandt, on the chemistry of pigments and properties of color (48).

Such objections, however, cannot detract from the great merits of this book. Ward has written a deeply textured and often surprising account of Peale, revealing the man in the many roles he successfully acted.

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