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Charles Willson Peale and Perspective

Tags: Charles Willson Peale, Peale's understanding of perspective, the Quadrant, copying a painting

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August 30

In the most remote attic room of the Winterthur Museum (sometime around midnight in the 1960's), a night watchman making his rounds and punching his time clock screamed with fright and dropped his flashlight. He believed that he had just seen the "Ghost of Winterthur". Many guards believed in the reality of a Winterthur ghost but what the guard saw (faintly in the shadows of the attic) was my hand in motion, illuminated by a projector. I promptly switched on the overhead light to convince the guard that I was not the shade of some past spirit. He was much relieved and continued his rounds.

I was tracing the projected image of a painting in order to make a copy of a work by the Colonial and Federal era Philadelphia artist, **Charles Willson Peale (1741-1822)** for **Wye House, near Easton, Maryland**. The Director of the Museum, Dr. Theodore Richardson, had asked me to make this copy so that Winterthur could purchase the original. **The plan was to place my copy in the great historic house where once the life-size portrait of Edward Lloyd, his wife, and child had originally hung.** Two challenges faced me. One was that Ted Richardson insisted that the painting be **made only five-eighths of its original size**. Reducing the image photographically and through projection captured the incredibly complex details of the original. The second and larger problem was that the copy had to be completed, varnished, and ready to hang within a month. Even Peale had not produced the original so quickly. Although I argued that to varnish the painting without allowing more than a month of drying time for the paint would result in cracking, that fact did not bother the clients. In fact, they seemed to like the idea of anticipating cracks. Fine crackle would make the painting appear old, so I painted a masonite panel with a dark umber ground in order to provide the cracks a natural color. I selected masonite for the support rather than canvas so that no one would mistake this painting for anything but a copy. Ted Richardson agreed that I could work night and day in the Museum (sleeping when necessary), in order to finish the copy directly from the original in a mere month. Night was the perfect time for darkness to project the image and produce an exact tracing at five-eighths of the original size. It was during that tracing that the night guard, who was not informed of my presence, saw my hand move in projected light and was certain that he saw the "Ghost of Winterthur!" It was natural to believe in ghosts at Winterthur, for this great gathering of more than 100 fully furnished period rooms assembled by Henry Francis duPont in Delaware, contains wonderful objects possessing innumerable messages from America's past seventeenth to mid nineteenth centuries.

When the copy was complete and varnished, it stood for inspection by staff members beside the original in the attic space. A visiting art historian who did not know about this project stopped by. Seeing the two paintings side by side he exclaimed with wonder that Peale had painted two versions with one slightly smaller than the other. After seeing the masonite support on the smaller painting, he came to the conclusion that Peale was truly advanced for having adopted masonite rather than canvas at such an early date. I had to explain that masonite was not available to Peale in the year 1771 when he painted the Lloyd Family. Masonite was a wood chip product invented by William H. Mason in 1924 and first manufactured in the 1930s in Laurel Mississippi. With that, he realized he was looking at a copy.

That copy now hangs in the entrance hall of Wye House, the great plantation home of the Lloyd family near Easton, MD. As predicted, the copy does bear a fine network of cracks because it was varnished before the paint was completely dry throughout. A few years after making this copy I was commissioned to copy another large family group by Peale. The original is an oil painting on canvas depicting Judge Robert Goldsborough, his wife, son, and daughter and a sculptured bust of George Washington. All figures are life size. The original once hung in Myrtle Grove, a great eighteenth century mansion also near Easton, Maryland. The painting was signed and dated by Peale in the year 1789. My copy replaced the original in Myrtle Grove when a major collector of American art acquired the original. **During the eighteen years that separated the two monumental paintings of the Lloyd and Goldsborough families, Charles Willson Peale made great artistic progress. Not only did his coloring improve, but also his use of perspective.** His new understanding of perspective, I believe, developed with the artist's employment of viewing devices. One was an optical device called a Camera Obscura and another a mechanical drawing machine he named in correspondence as a painter's "Quadrant". I believe that the Quadrant is a variation on a machine invented by Benjamin Dearborn of Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Peale employed this machine for representation of architectural views like that of the Maryland State House. Peale's papers explain that his drawing machine was like a moving pyramid on a horizontal plane with a fixed eyehole. He used this machine for some drawings that subsequently resulted in engraved architectural views for the Columbian Magazine of 1789.

As I made the full-scale replica of the Goldsborough painting, it dawned on me that Peale's use of linear perspective had changed dramatically. **In the Lloyd portrait, facial parts of all figures were precisely parallel** while in the Goldsborough painting all facial parts converged to distant vanishing points on the artist's horizon. Peale's use of at least three different kinds of perspective machines in the 1780s prompted me to visit the Scientific Instrument Collection of Harvard. By 1765, Harvard owned a large Book Camera (a Camera Lucida attributed to Benjamin Martin, of London). I was permitted to use this machine on the roof of the Science building, looking down into Harvard Yard. By so doing, I learned that lines drafted in a Camera Obscura have a special look. They are tentative and unsure because the artist's head and hand tremble with breath and heart beat. These movements minutely alter the position of the image. Also, the focus of the image in a period Camera Obscura is not as crisp as those seen today on the ground glass of a modern camera. Having used an eighteenth century Camera Obscura, I've been able to identify drawings made by Charles Willson Peale depicting buildings on the Brandywine River in Delaware that are now in the collections of the American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia. I've also been able to separate the Obscura drawings from those he made with other perspective viewing devices he described as "of utility to the painter."

He had studied in London between 1766 and 1769 and undoubtedly there came to realize the importance of foreshortening and perspective in painting. **By 1772 when he was painting the Lloyd family group, he was already using a grid delineator.** However, his insatiable curiosity about instruments coupled with a desire to accurately represent what he saw in nature prompted his engagement with other viewing devices and improvements in his art.

Why does this matter? Convergent perspective suggests an important meaning embodied in Peale's famous self-portrait (The Artist in His Museum, 1822, Philadelphia Museum of Art) in which he lifts a curtain to reveal his museum's interior displaying specimens and visitors. The lines of the floors and cases within the museum converge on the viewer's horizon to the point of sight. In a sketch made for this painting stands a man with a child, directing attention to that point of sight or vanishing point symbolic of learning, education, and enlightenment. Peale was, after all, a "Renaissance man" and an important figure of the enlightenment.

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About Jonathan Fairbanks:

with readers. It is my hope that these essays are both to inquiries from readers. At other times the essay reflects on care, methods and materials used by artists and craftsmen, and historical references. The many responses are a pleasure for me to receive.

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Sculpture Emeritus

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

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