CHARLES WILLSON PEALE’S
PORTRAITS OF WASHINGTON

By CHARLES COLEMAN SELLERS

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A curious tradition turns up again and again in connection with portraits of the Father of Our Country. This or that one is said to have been presented by the great man himself to its original owner as a reward for some civil or military duty well performed, or as a mere gesture of friendship. We have the same story with portraits of Franklin and other famous men, and doubtless only the more so with Washington because of the greater number of Washington portraits. Family traditions have generally a germ of truth in them, and this one deserves some respect considering the fact that, so far as our observation has carried us, all such pictures can be traced back to an owner who was, or could have been, acquainted with Washington.

On the other hand, if all these tales were true, Washington would have spent the whole of his ample fortune paying for his artistic largesse—and this in spite of the fact that many of the pieces belong to the lower ranges both of price and quality. Furthermore, good taste forbade the giving of portraits in the casual manner in which a modern celebrity might send out his photograph. It simply was not done.

Portraiture was a costly luxury, then as now. And native inhibitions and social customs controlled it. Many Americans shunned it as a sign of worldliness or personal vanity. Its patrons defended it as a reinforcement of the ties of domesticity. Family portraits gave dignity and solidarity to the home, and portraits of public heroes, fathers of the state, were regarded similarly with a Roman piety. The miniature was a peculiarly intimate branch, for parent, child, or lover alone, a private art, in which Charles Willson Peale excelled for the tenderness and sympathy he brought into it. The miniature was worn discreetly out of sight until, during the Revolution, European influences relaxed this restraint somewhat.

All the portraits of Washington represent a faithful adherence to convention, and this very fact suggests an explanation of the legendary gifts. An admirer or personal acquaintance could order a portrait from any of the painters turning them out. But it would have been good manners to ask Washington’s permission before doing so. This is granted, and in time the exchange of courtesies grows into the story of a gift.

Charles Willson Peale painted seven life por-
traits of Washington and many replicas. In those for the general and his family it is clear that Mrs. Washington took the leading interest and made most of the arrangements, her husband posing with an impatience he was obliged to confess but paying the bills without demur.

The first, the well-known three-quarter length of May, 1772, now at Washington and Lee University, was a family portrait, a companion piece to that of Mrs. Washington by Wollaston. Jonathan Boucher, the schoolmaster parson, rector of St. John’s, Annapolis, and president of the jovial Hominy Club, of which Peale was a member, introduced the painter to this patron-
age. He had already sung the praises of “self-tutor’d Peale” in the “Poets’ Corner” of the Maryland Gazette. “Jacky” Custis was one of his pupils, and boy and artist rode down to Mount Vernon together. The work that Peale did there and its very liberal payment is recorded in Washington’s diaries and accounts.

There is no contemporary record, however, of the small head now owned by the Historical Society of Pennsylvania and long a subject of controversy (see p. 147). Against the claim that it is the original study for the three-quarter length has been opposed the fact that the uniform is not colonial but continental buff and blue, and this is not overpaint but adheres directly to the canvas. We know that Peale rarely made preliminary studies, and then only in pencil or chalk. Yet we may accept this little picture as a replica of May 1772, painted to have in readiness for further orders from so liberal a patron, living so far from Annapolis. It must have shown the face only, with the outline of the uniform barely indicated. It remained in the artist’s possession and after his son took over the management of “Peale’s Museum” in 1810 it appears in the museum gallery as “Col. Washington, painted by C. W. Peale in 1773.” Obviously Rubens Peale had had someone, and we may point the finger at his brother, Raphaelle, fill out the canvas with a uniform which, though wrong in color, follows the lines of the original picture.

When Peale painted Washington again it was as commander-in-chief of the new army and under circumstances that are curiously reflected in the picture itself. On May 16, 1776, Congress summoned Washington to a conference on military operations. The message was transmitted to him by President Hancock in a tone of much personal warmth and with an offer of the hospitality of his own home while in Philadelphia. Three days later Hancock called on Peale and, as the painter’s diary has it, “bespoke the portrait of Genl. Washington and Lady.” The portraits would be a handsome compliment to his expected guests and a seal upon their friendship.

Hancock, who accounted himself a military man, had been bitterly disappointed at not receiving the post which Washington now held. As he was arranging matters it would have been difficult for the Virginian to deny him a conspicuous command in the approaching campaign. But Washington adroitly sidestepped. When he and Mrs. Washington arrived on May 23 they accepted instead the hospitality of their old friend Peyton Randolph. The tone of Hancock’s correspondence at once alters to one of cool formality. He went through with the matter of the portraits, however—three-quarter lengths, the general’s with a background of burning Charlestown and the siege lines at Boston. Mrs. Washington’s, now known only through an early copy, shows her with a harpsichord and books, the attributes of accomplished gentility.

The general gave two sittings only. And the portrait shows a face oddly diffident and uncertain, oddly expressing the embarrassing attendant circumstances (see opposite page). The whole piece seems ill at ease. Peale rarely painted a smile, but he tried to induce an expression of pleasure and then catch that on his canvas. The mouth here is slightly smiling, but in an awkward way, its awkwardness accentuated by the artificial pose of the body, which was probably done after the sitter’s departure. The likeness must have pleased Mrs. Washington, for she ordered a replica in miniature, now in the collections of the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association.

The Hancock portraits were shipped to Boston toward the end of the year, and Peale marched out with the militia to the New Jersey campaign. When summer came he was haunting headquarters in the hope of another sitting, with an order for a new miniature from Mrs. Washington to justify his importunity. He had also a print in mind. A new likeness of the victor of Trenton and Princeton would be a valuable asset. But the general did not pose for him un-
til autumn, and then briefly, on the eve of battle. Of his work done from this sitting but one ivory remains, probably the original, now in the Metropolitan Museum (see p. 149). Its earliest recorded owner was Harriet Washington, the general’s niece, afterward Mrs. Andrew Parks.

There has been much confusion as to the precise date of this portrait. Peale, in a letter of two years after the event, says that it had been taken “on the march to the battle of Germantown.” And long afterward, in a testimonial to the merits of Rembrandt Peale’s idealized Washington of 1829, he wrote that during the sitting Washington “received dispatches communicating the surrender of Burgoyne.” This part of the story Rembrandt Peale loved to repeat in later years, adding colorful detail and sometimes substituting the surrender of Cornwallis.

Germantown was fought on October 4, 1777. Washington received the news of Burgoyne’s surrender on October 18. But go back to September 28, for then we know that the painter was at headquarters. It was at Pennypacker’s Mills, west of Philadelphia, a Sunday, and the army was resting on its march to Germantown. And here a dispatch rider from the north arrived with news of the first battle of Saratoga. It was hailed as a triumph, the troops marched out on parade with rolling drums, a salute of thirteen cannon, and a gill of rum to every man.

Headquarters here was in the big, well-furnished mansion of the miller. Rembrandt Peale’s humble “New Jersey farmhouse,” with the painter in the only chair and his subject sitting on the edge of a bed, is absurd, and yet his description of Colonel Tilghman’s entrance with the dispatch rings true—how Washington blurted out the news and showed the paper to his aide “but instantly took it back, apparently from a conviction of the impropriety of showing an unread paper to a subordinate officer. He continued the sitting with a calm and satisfied air.”

Peale painted at least one replica of this miniature, made a small mezzotint from it, of which no impression is now known, and modeled a bust in clay, which may possibly be that shown in the background of the Goldsborough family group, owned by Mr. and Mrs. Robert G. Henry, of Myrtle Grove, Talbot County, Maryland. This enterprise taught Peale the hazards of a wholly new, even though accurate, likeness of a public figure. His Hancock portraits had been published in a popular print, and the new likeness, with its differently posed head, was not readily accepted. In his next, he went back to the pose he had chosen in 1776.

This was in February, 1779. Washington, as before, had been called into consultation with Congress on the military situation. The long and bloody Philadelphia campaigns had ended, and to mark their triumphant close the state of Pennsylvania commissioned a full-length portrait for the chamber of its Supreme Executive Council. In this picture, now at the Pennsylvania Academy, all the faults of the earlier canvas are set right. The face shows pleasure, but also a calm assurance. The attitude is natural and graceful—“easy, erect, and noble,” as Jefferson described the tall Virginian’s carriage. And, as it deserved to be, the picture was an immediate success. Commissions came in from private gentlemen, the representative of Spain ordered five replicas for foreign courts, the departing American envoy to Holland had to have one as a reinforcement to his mission, and Peale’s hands were clearly full for some time to come. His first replica, painted in July, was brought to Paris by the French ambassador, Gérard de Rayneval, and presented to the king. It now hangs in the Capitol at Washington. The picture is a typical court painting, but with an American freshness and realism unusual in court paintings. Here the European princes had their first view of the wilderness general who had trapped the Landgrave of Hesse-Cassel’s veterans and beaten the British regulars in the open field. And for the painter it was a personal triumph; his work, with that of his master, West, now hung in the palaces of kings.

Turning out these full-lengths at thirty guineas each was Peale’s best source of income for the next four years. James Peale, who had resigned from the army in 1778, lived with him and seems to have acquired his penchant for groups of little figures while working on the backgrounds of these pictures. Some of the later pieces seem to be wholly his. After York-
Peale’s fourth life portrait, painted in 1779 for the Supreme Executive Council of the state of Pennsylvania. Courtesy of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts
town, the brothers substituted that for the Princeton background view. Changes in the uniform, with Peale's meticulousness in matters of military accouterment, also help to date the pictures. The blue ribbon insignia of the commander-in-chief, which appears in the portraits of 1776, 1777, and 1779, was replaced by three silver stars on the epaulets. There was an interval in which both the ribbon and three gilt buttons on the epaulets were worn. Peale also improved the composition as he went on, chiefly in giving the flag a more central and climactic place. And, in passing, it may be noted that, Betsy Ross and the famous resolution of Congress to the contrary, Peale's succession of portraits shows that Washington's army marched and fought to the end of the war under a blue banner with a circle of thirteen stars.

The Museum owns one of these full-length portraits (see detail on cover), which may be dated by its uniform between June and August, 1780, and which has two unique features. At the left, instead of the Princeton scene, we see a winter landscape of lowland, distant houses by a river, and one tall tree, bare of foliage. It must be Trenton village, by the Delaware. Peale had visited and sketched both battlefields while at work on his original picture. This portrait, like the Museum's miniature of 1777, was formerly owned by Washington's niece, Mrs. Andrew Parks. We do not know whether it came from her own or her husband's line, but the changes strongly suggest that it was painted, like those others, on Mrs. Washington's order. For one thing, all the other full-lengths show a heavy saber at the hip, Washington's "battle sword," which he wore throughout his active service and which is now at the United States National Museum. Here, instead, is a straight and slender rapier, a much more elegant weapon. It is known as the "state" or dress sword, because Washington reserved it for formal occasions, and it is now in the collection of swords at Mount Vernon. The faithful rendering of its chased hilt shows that Peale had the original to work from. The Trenton background shows us that this picture was done for a person who chose to memorialize that famous and sensational coup rather than the strategically more brilliant action at Princeton.

The Princeton battle was celebrated most fully in the large picture commissioned by the...
college in 1783 to fill a frame from which King George's portrait had been torn by an American cannon ball. It was Peale's fifth life portrait of Washington, although he had but one sitting, December 10, 1783, and cautiously used it merely to strengthen the earlier likeness. The figure he altered much more, discarding the naturalness of the former pose. Subject and background are no longer a coherent whole. Washington strikes an attitude, holding his sword like a lecturer's pointer and smiling blandly, while directly behind him General Mercer lies in his death agony and, farther away still, the battle thunders to its climax. This formal treatment by means of separate statements united only by the general composition was true to convention and highly satisfactory to his academic audience. The composition all builds up to the flag overhead, Peale's first representation, by the way, of the Stars and Stripes, although in his brisk little battle scene in the background he shows the Americans charging forward under the old blue banner.

With the war's end, other artists crowded in to share the business that the Peales had had almost to themselves. As the best answer to increasing competition, Charles Willson Peale expanded his painting-room exhibit into a portrait gallery, housed in a skylighted hall, the first of the sort in the country. And when the Constitutional Convention promised an influx of wealthy and important men, he hit upon the idea of a series of mezzotints from the gallery portraits, with one of Washington, from a new likeness, as the principal piece. This was the so-called Convention portrait of 1787, a bust portrait showing Washington in uniform.

It was the first time that Peale had asked the great man to pose as a personal favor to himself, and he put the request with much diffidence and anxiety. That anxiety may be traced in the painting itself, its lines unusually solemn and hard, and without that look of easy pleasantness which Peale loved to bring to a canvas. It has often been denied that Washington ever actually smiled. We know that he did laugh and smile with the rest, but, in these later years especially, when he had become a symbol as well as a leader of the nation, a dignified solemnity characterized his face and manner. It is this alone that Peale has caught. And one can easily imagine his sitter, the most rigorously punctual of mortals, glancing at the clock and remarking, as he is said to have done, "Mr. Peale, my time for sitting has expired; but if three minutes longer would be of any importance to you, I will remain, and make up the time by hastening my walk to the State House. I know exactly how long it will take me to walk there; and it will not do for me, as President, to be absent at the hour of meeting."

Peale's seventh and last life portrait of Washington was painted in 1795, in the last week of October or the first of November, a bust portrait in civilian dress, now in the New York Historical Society. It is in interesting contrast to that which young Rembrandt Peale made at the same time, and to the Convention portrait. Peale had announced his retirement from painting in 1794, had asked this sitting of the president entirely on Rembrandt's behalf, and took part in it only that he might keep the studio conversation going and give confidence to the seventeen-year-old boy. It was now Rembrandt's
Peale's last life portrait of Washington, 1795. Courtesy of the New-York Historical Society

turn to labor anxiously, for this canvas was to launch him on his professional career. His work is brilliantly done, strangely superior, indeed, to his other work of the same time, and yet he shows Washington with an even more fixed and heavy visage than his father had, eight years before. The father, on the other hand, worked now with unusual ease, achieving a sense of movement, a look of intelligence, that are unique in the portraiture of Washington.
The father's portrait was placed in his gallery, now an adjunct of his museum of natural history. He made but few replicas from it, leaving it to his brother, his sons, and his nephew to meet the increasing demand for faces of the First Citizen, using his own originals as they would. Rembrandt had his new portrait for this purpose. James Peale and Charles Peale Polk used the Convention type—that air of dignity and the uniform were popular components. And it now seems probable that Raphaelle Peale joined in the business.

The Museum owns a portrait of the Convention type which its former owner, Charles Allen Munn, believed to have been by the elder Peale. It is not an exact replica of the original, nor so competently painted. Comparison shows that it follows the mezzotint rather than the painting, the lines sharper and harder, the face, as in the print, slightly elongated. Furthermore, the copyist has brought the angle of the coat collar on the subject's left sharply upward, putting the uniform more into the style of the 1795-1800 period, when an erect, high collar was an element of smart military dress. From whose hand this version came might remain wholly in doubt were it not for the existence of an exact duplicate, curiously documented, owned by Mr. Robert M. Green, Jr., of Philadelphia.

Mr. Green's picture is on its original stretcher, actually a rigid frame, nailed together and without keys. It is a family heirloom from its first owner, Captain William McFaden (1751-1839), master mariner and privateer of the Revolution. With the portrait, the Captain left his descendants the undated certification:

"Washington portrait was presented to me by Washington. Painted by my old friend Peale which he said was the first painting of Washington by him in uniform loaned it to friend Peale to make a copy. Wm. McFaden."

Here is the only occasion on which a contemporary bears out the recurrent story of a gift portrait from Washington. Captain McFaden, a solid citizen and a neighbor, may easily have been acquainted with Washington, may have asked and received permission to hang the President's portrait in his parlor and considered this exchange of courtesies in the light of a presentation. Such a personal connection would date the picture before Washington's retirement from the presidency in March 1797.

We may guess, at least, that the Museum's picture may be the copy which "friend Peale" made from the borrowed painting. McFaden's second wife was Sarah Lee, sister of William Lee, Gloucester County, New Jersey, people. The Museum's portrait came from Samuel Lee, who is said to have bought it from "Peale"—and though the relationship of Samuel to William and Sarah is not known, a further connection is suggested. Since Charles Willson and James Peale had painted Washington many times before in uniform, the identity of "friend Peale" himself is narrowed down to Raphaelle or Rembrandt. We have enough of Rembrandt's contemporary work to acquit him. This careless, vigorous, cheap workmanship is characteristic rather of the elder brother. Raphaelle, never in close sympathy with his father as Rembrandt was, would have been the one to copy the print rather than take down the painting from the gallery wall and do his job under the parental eye. And Raphaelle, rather than the prim Rembrandt, would have been more likely to have grown into an "old friend" of the rough-and-ready captain. Speculating from so odd a document, we cannot hope to stand upon firm ground. But the evidence, such as it is, points to these two pictures, Mr. Green's painting and the one in the Museum, as the earliest known works of Raphaelle Peale.