

Charles Willson Peale: Painter, Patriot, Princeton Icon

by Dan Aubrey

There are two reasons to assume that American artist Charles Willson Peale's 1784 painting "George Washington at the Battle of Princeton" — on permanent view at the Princeton University Art Museum — is an accurate depiction of our nation's first president.

First, Washington sat at least seven times for Peale, who used those sittings to create nearly 60 portraits.

But more importantly, Peale fought in the battles of Trenton and Princeton and witnessed Washington in action.

A phenomenon in any century, Charles Willson Peale's life reads like a scenario for a screenplay.

He is born in Maryland in 1741 to an English father who comes to the colonies to escape being hanged for forgery.

Apprenticed to a saddle maker when he was nine (around the time of his father's death), he starts his own saddle business a decade later. He also teaches himself sign painting and tries his hand at creating portraits. At 21, he studies with John Hesselius, son of the one of the first major American portrait painters.

Poor business practices and strong political enemies force him into bankruptcy; he escapes creditors by going to Boston, where he meets and learns from American artist John Singleton Copley.

After a two-year trip to England to study with famed expatriate American painter Benjamin West, Peale returns to Maryland in 1769, begins a career as an itinerant portrait artist, and creates his first portrait of George Washington, who appears in the red British officer's uniform he wore during the French and Indian War.

In 1775 Peale, his wife Rachel, and their son, Rembrandt (the first of several named after prominent European artists) move to Philadelphia where Peale establishes his painting studio. But on July 8, 1776, he hears the Declaration of Independence read in front of what is now known as Independence Hall, becomes a patriot, and joins the Revolutionary Army. He serves under John Cadwalader, the Trenton-born leader whose family is the namesake for Trenton's Cadwalader Park.

Then there are the battles of Trenton and Princeton, moments where Peale encounters, as he later writes, "the most hellish scene I have ever beheld." Those moments affected his paintings.

"During the Revolution, Peale replaced symbolic objects with straightforward narrative details describing the sitter and his situation in life. Such details form the background of 'George Washington at the Battle of Princeton,'" notes Louise Lippincott, art historian and curator of fine arts at the Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh.

Recalling her research on Peale when she worked for the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia, Lippincott says during an interview that Peale was "wonderfully entrepreneurial" and that through his paintings and cultural efforts "he has left us with the

Charles Willson Peale's 'Washington at Princeton' portraits are 'an icon of American art,' says curator Karl Kusserow.

best of the 18th century."

His artistry, she notes, came from a personal attempt to excel and to support his family, "He mastered portraiture in the same way he learned to fix watches — by trying. Seeing the work of a local painter in 1763, he determined to do better, and, equipped with a few home-made brushes and paints, he executed a self-portrait. From the beginning, Peale viewed painting as a craft rather than as an art."

She says that from the work of Hesselius and Copley, Peale learned to respect a good likeness and to think of painting as an imitation of reality. Additionally, the scrupulous likeness of the sitter guaranteed a pleasing portrait that in turn would provide more income.

So would his popular replications of Washington. In fact, there are eight paintings depicting Washington at the January 3, 1777, Princeton battle. Two versions are on the Princeton campus.

The Princeton Museum image

shows Washington with sword raised and Nassau Hall in the distance. The other painting in Nassau Hall depicts Washington after the war and gracefully leaning on a cannon.

Princeton University Art Museum curator of American art Karl Kusserow says, "Princeton University is especially fortunate to own both versions of Peale's great 'Washington at Princeton' portraits — one, which is unique, showing him during the battle, with the dying General Mercer at his feet, the other depicting the victorious aftermath, as captive British soldiers are led from the field. Each is an icon of American art, and together they provide a kind of capsule narrative of this crucial event in the nation's history."

Speaking of the museum's painting, Kusserow says, "It's probably the most important American painting on the Princeton campus."

While the two curators focus on the painting's artistry and history, there is another element that intrigues people. Six years ago one of Peale's Washington at Princeton paintings sold for \$21.3 million. Sold through Christies, the painting was part of a collection of American art acquired by John Insley Blair (grandson of the John Insley Blair Hall) and purchased by Yardley, PA, art dealer C.L. Prickett.

Yet the human and symbolic connection to Nassau Hall make the museum's "Washington at the Battle of Princeton" priceless, an aspect that reflects Kusserow's statement: "It's my favorite painting in the collection."

That symbolism is striking, literally. During the Princeton battle, a cannon ball fired by the Americans smashed into the Nassau Hall and ruined a large painting of George II. In 1783 when the Continental Congress met in the building, Washington visited the hall. There the general was persuaded by the college trustees to pose for the painting by Peale. When completed, that full body portrait of Washington in the Princeton battle filled the frame that once honored a king.

Now to finish the Peale scenario: he concludes his military service, returns to Philadelphia,



Elder Statesman: *This 1784 version of Charles Willson Peale's 'Washington at Princeton' (93" x 57") is in the permanent collection of the Princeton University Art Museum.*

serves in the General Assembly of Pennsylvania, and paints and exhibits portraits of the patriots Benjamin Franklin, John Hancock, Thomas Jefferson, and Alexander Hamilton (who also fought in the battles of Trenton and Princeton). In his old age, he settles down by getting involved with studying science, participating in fossil digs, painting the portraits of Lewis and Clark, and runs one of the country's first museums, located in Philadelphia.

Yet Peale's depiction of Washington in the battle of Princeton is

one of his greatest and lasting efforts. After all, the painting lets us see one of the most important moments of our nation's history through the eyes of a man who lived it.

"Washington at the Battle of Princeton" is on view at the Princeton University Art Museum, open Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Fridays, and Saturdays, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., Thursdays, 10 a.m. to 10 p.m., and Sundays 1 to 5 p.m. Admission is free. For more information, go to www.princetonartmuseum.org or call 609-258-3788.