

## **James Peale**

Born Chestertown, Maryland, 1749.

James Peale was the son of Charles Peale—the schoolmaster at Kent County School, Chestertown, Maryland—and Margaret Triggs Peale.

Charles Peale died when James was an infant, and the family moved to Annapolis, where James was trained by his older brother Charles Willson Peale, first to be a saddle maker and then a painter. Charles had completed his apprenticeship in saddlery in 1762 (he was 13) This was just as James was reaching the age when a boy might enter his training in a trade. Neither brother remained in the saddle-making business. James apprenticed to a cabinetmaker in Charlestown, Maryland, in 1765.

Charles went to London to study art and then came back to Annapolis and opened a painting studio. James next entered his brother's painting studio, about 1769 (at age 20). James applied his carpentry skills in Charles's studio, making frames for his brother's paintings and generally helping him establish his artistic workplace. Charles also gave his brother lessons in drawing and painting, and wrote to Benjamin West in 1771 that James "copies very well, and has painted a little from the life."

James continued working in his brother's Annapolis studio until January 14, 1776 (age 27), when he entered the regiment of the Maryland Line. Within three months, he was promoted to captain. During the next three years, he fought in the battles of Long Island, White Plains, Trenton, Brandywine, Germantown, Princeton, and Monmouth. Even though he received a personal letter from George Washington asking him to remain in service, in June 1779, James Peale resigned his commission and moved to Philadelphia.

James Peale lived with his older brother in Philadelphia until 1782, when he married Mary Claypoole, sister of the artist James Claypoole, Jr. Even after he established his own household, James continued to assist his older brother.

He rejoined his brother Charles, who had moved there with his wife and family, and once again lived and worked in his brother's studio. James later became a member of the Society of Cincinnati, which was formed after the Revolution to honor the officers of that war. His exemplary military service would lead to portrait commissions and serve as the basis of his history paintings. It also earned him a pension late in his life, when his health began to fail.

Late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century American artists were partial to history subjects, even though there was little market for such paintings in this country. Their interpretations of morally uplifting scenes from history, literature, and the Bible, demonstrated their knowledge of European painting theory. The subjects of James Peale's few history paintings were drawn from the annals of the American Revolution.

Increasingly, however, James Peale established himself independently as a talented painter of portrait miniatures, the mainstay of his career and reputation. In 1786 the brothers agreed to divide their portrait business, with James painting miniatures and Charles, oil portraits. Each continued producing likenesses of both types, although their efforts were now specialized.



Figure 3. James Peale, *The Artist and His Family*, 1795, 31 1/4 x 32 3/4 in. (79.4 x 83.2 cm), Courtesy of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, Gift of John Frederick Lewis, 1922.1.1.

He also was a skilled painter of oil portraits on canvas, of which he apparently made fewer than seventy. *The Artist and His Family* (fig. 3) combines Peale's abilities in portraiture with his interest in landscape and command of the so-called conversation piece. The relatively small canvas includes full-length portraits of himself, his wife, and their five children. The conversation piece is a type of informal portrait that was popular in London in the mid-eighteenth century.

The precisely delineated setting in this family portrait hints at the artist's broader interest in landscape painting. Before the 1820s, landscape was relatively rare as a subject in American painting, except in the overmantels made by decorative painters or as a background for outdoor portraits. But James was painting them by 1788, when Charles arranged to sell his own and his brother's work by raffle.

Charles Willson Peale prided himself on educating his sons and daughters alike, but it was James who produced some of the first professional women artists in America. Perhaps because his only son, James, Jr. (1789–1876), showed relatively little interest in painting, James, Sr., paid greater attention to his daughters' artistic education. Of his six children who survived to maturity, three became accomplished painters.<sup>26</sup> Anna Claypoole Peale (1798–1871) was a miniaturist (fig. 5) and a still-life painter. Margaretta Peale (1795–1882) painted trompe l'oeil subjects after her cousin Raphaëlle and tabletop fruit still lifes that show her father's influence; around 1828 Margaretta also began painting oil portraits. Like her father and sister Margaretta, Sarah Miriam Peale (1800–1885) also became a portraitist and still-life painter. Her fruit paintings especially resemble her father's in their arrangements on a shelf or table placed low in the picture and in their use of brightly lit subjects against dark backgrounds. Given James Peale's versatility and his contribution to the next generation of Peale family artists, he deserves greater scholarly attention than he has so far received.

Died Philadelphia, May 24, 1831. He was 65.

### **Another Bio**

James Peale, the youngest brother of Charles Willson Peale, was born in Chestertown, Maryland. He received painting lessons from Charles Willson before serving in the Continental Army during the American Revolution from 1776 to 1779. He resided in Philadelphia with his brother until his marriage in 1782, after which he established his own household and an independent artistic career.

For much of the late eighteenth century, both Charles Willson and James were active in the field of portrait painting, Charles Willson painting in oil on canvas, and James working in watercolor on ivory. It is for these lovely, diminutive images that James is frequently remembered today. But it is in still life that James Peale made his most lasting contribution to the history and development of American art.

The painter and teacher Sir Joshua Reynolds outlined the hierarchy of art subjects for the eighteenth-century students of the Royal Academy in London. His theory, then widely accepted in Europe and the United States, placed history painting with its noble themes at the highest level, and still-life painting at the lowest. Artists were discouraged from merely painting an imitation of nature, which could only demonstrate technical skills and not inform or elevate the intellectual content of the subject. However, at the end of the eighteenth and into the nineteenth centuries some American painters broke rank to engage in an on-going exploration of that lowest of genres, still life. Chief among them were members of the Peale family.

Charles Willson Peale, founder of the "Peale Dynasty," established a tradition of painting which matured in assorted forms through the families various branches. The two who became involved with still life were his sons Raphaelle and James. Together they laid a foundation for still-life painting upon which succeeding generations of Peales and other artists would build.

James and Raphaelle each developed his own style, but their work had a number of features in common which have come to define "the Peale type" of still life. Usually fruit or other edible items are arranged parallel to the picture Plane on a ledge, shelf, or elevated surface. These are lit from the upper left, the light falling over and defining the forms. Often a second light source illuminates the right background, visually pushing the objects forward out of what would otherwise be shadowed obscurity. The depictions emphasize the spatial clarity of solid, simple shapes. A knife and fruit peel occasionally serve as a punning signature. James's arrangements are more casual than Raphaelle's, usually presenting a profusion of fruit, flowers, or vegetables, with a sense of fullness and abundance, and emphasizing the passage of time. As William H. Gerdtz has observed, in James's work there are "age spots, worm holes and other blemishes ... [he was] conscious of and concerned with change and age.

The Butler Institute's painting has many characteristics of the Peale-type still life: mounded fruit casually arranged illumination from left to right, and a sense of captured time. In it luminous green grapes casually spill across a gilt-rimmed porcelain plate, covering part of it. Rolling over the edge and out on to the gray-surfaced ledge are bunches of red grapes whose curved surfaces vary in color from coppery brown to ruby red. These grapes pile up on the left against a group of yellow apples tinged with red to green streaks and spots. Laid across the grapes is a woody stalk from a grape vine still bearing brown and green colored leaves. The light falling across the fruit defines the colors and accentuates the transparent, taut skins of the different types of grapes. Time has been arrested by the painter at a peak of fullness shared by all the fruit; a moment of ripeness that cannot last but will very soon end with a change of color, loss of firmness, and the sweet fragrance of decay.

This sensitivity to the mutability of nature and the passage of time, as well as the deft rendering of light and surfaces, indicates an experienced eye and hand at work. But these qualities are also expressive of a combined artistic interest and insight into life found in the best work of this extraordinary family of painters.