

HUMS 220: Collecting Nature and Art, 1500–1850
Professor Paola Bertucci
Teaching Fellow Sarah Pickman

By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. –Jordan Cutler-Tietjen

Entrepreneur, Democrat, Patriot: Sameness and Difference in Charles Willson Peale's
Philadelphia Museum
by Jordan Cutler-Tietjen

The Philadelphia Museum, founded and spearheaded by painter and polymath Charles Willson Peale, has attracted legions of admirers and scholars over the intervening two centuries, but perhaps none so prolific as Charles Cole Sellers. Sellers penned a nearly 500-page biography of Peale, as well as countless articles and pamphlets dedicated to unveiling the history of Peale's life's work. Sellers may be as close to an expert on Peale as has lived, but that does not mean that he is unimpeachable. "From [the Philadelphia Museum's] inception, the serious purpose was evidence," he wrote. "Here was to be no hodgepodge, but an orderly exposition of natural history, based on Linnaean classification, and of inanimate materials, throughout the entire world".¹ A few moments of rose-colored retrospection can perhaps only be expected from Sellers, who is no outside observer of Peale's familial legacy—he is Peale's great grandson². Although Sellers is correct that Peale professed admiration for the British Museum and the Enlightenment ideals it represented, I contend that here, Sellers dramatically miscasts Peale's professional trajectory, oversimplifying it dangerously.³ First, Peale approached museum curation as an entrepreneurial endeavor—even "from its inception," it was not just a passion but a profit-seeking investment, and a risky one at that, whose "serious purpose" was not static but

¹ Charles Coleman Sellers, "Peale's Museum," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 43, no. 1 (1953): accessed May 3, 2018, JSTOR ,<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1005678>. Pg. 253.

² Lillian B. Miller, ed., *The Collected Papers of Charles Willson Peale and His Family: A Guide and Index to the Microfiche Edition* (Millwood, NY: Kraus Microform, 1980). Pg. 66.

³ James Delbourgo, *Collecting the World: Hans Sloane and the Origins of the British Museum*(Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2017). Ch. 7.

evolved from year to year. Second, Peale capitalized on the democratic excitement of the time to compile a collection that was neither strictly “Linnaean” nor loosely “hodgepodge,” but somewhere in between. Third, his venture may have culled objects from “the entire world,” but Peale understood his project at large to be local and nationalistic, inflected by the character of freshly post-Revolution America. There’s no better evidence of this geographic emplacement than Peale’s famous mastodon skeleton, which collapsed the distance between the exotic and the domestic like no European wonder had before. Peale, steeped in the American mythos, used his entrepreneurial savvy to emulate European collecting practices, inventing his own tropes along the way. In doing so, he stitched himself inextricably into the American patchwork.

Contextualizing Peale: His Background and His Forebears



Traces of collections past, as well as of the Peale family’s history, are pictured in this ubiquitous self-portrait, entitled *The Artist in His Museum*⁴

⁴ Charles Willson Peale, *The Artist in His Museum*, 1822, Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Pennsylvania.

As the palette on the table flanking the figure (as well as the very fact of the painting's existence) signifies, Charles Peale considered himself, first and foremost, an artist. Born in 1741, he spent his childhood drawing his mother's embroidery patterns and rose to prominence as the premier portraitist of the Revolutionary War, capturing the likenesses of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson in oil on canvas.⁵ His pivot to museum-making made sense insofar as he lived in a moment of epistemic transition.⁶ In the early modern period, the boundary between nature and art was blurrier. *Naturalia*, often mythic or foreign objects, were traditionally displayed in Europe alongside *artificialia*, anything contrived by human hands. The effect was microcosmic—collectors sought to represent the widening world in overflowing, wondrous rooms, commonly called *Wunderkammern*.⁷ But between 1750 and 1850, these collections gave way to the rigidly defined museums that proliferate today.

Above, Peale depicted not just men but women and children enjoying his museum's wonders. This choice was intentional, and situates Peale in the midst of another shift in democratization. Though there's a risk to painting in broad strokes, this century can also be said to have encapsulated the transition from private collections to public museums. Nobility no longer secreted their heirlooms away for a prestigious guest list; nation-states instead became the biggest purveyors of collected goods, open to the populace (though sometimes with a price).

So begin the stories of Peale as single dot in a continuous line of collecting practices. But equally significant is the “effective history,” per Foucault's phrasing, of Peale's Philadelphia Museum, which focuses on the moments of rupture and difference that Peale instantiated. What

⁵ Lillian B. Miller, ed., *The Collected Papers of Charles Willson Peale and His Family: A Guide and Index to the Microfiche Edition* (Millwood, NY: Kraus Microform, 1980). Pg. 65.

⁶ Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 2015). Ch. 1-2.

⁷ Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature: 1150-1750* (New York: Zone Books, 2001). Ch. 7.

follows is an investigation into the similitude and otherness of the preeminent post-War American museum, as seen through the eyes of its founding father.

Peale the Entrepreneur

On December 18th, 1785, Peale “was never in greater want of money.”⁸ He expressed these economic woes in a letter to the parents of one of his painting amanuenses who had not yet paid for “two years board,” but Peale located his immediate crises elsewhere: in the “very poor returns for the time and money spent on my Exhibition.”⁹ Peale sent many letters like this to his friends and businesses acquaintances throughout the mid-1780s, when his “long struggle for financial support” was at its most dire¹⁰. Starting the museum may have exacerbated Peale’s debt, but according to Sellers, it did not begin it, as “for some years [earlier] he had been desperately poor.”¹¹ After the War, Peale had relied on his wife’s inheritance to move back to their home in Annapolis, then to Philadelphia.¹² Despite rubbing shoulders with the well-to-do men of New England, his painterly predilection had rendered him a blue-collar artisan. In fact, building a skylit gallery space next to his home to display his portraits—how he first conceived of his museum—was supposed to launch him out of poverty. In his unpublished autobiography, Peale remembered 1785 as the year of his idea to “form a exhibition [...] which in the end might

⁸ Dr. Sir," letter from Charles Willson Peale, December 18, 1785, Sterling Library Microfiche Collection, New Haven, CT. The Peale Family Papers, Series II-A, Card 14. Accessed May 02, 2018.

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ Gary Kulik, "Introduction," in *Mermaids, Mummies, and Mastodons: The Emergence of the American Museum*, ed. William T. Alderson (Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museums, 1992). Pg. 11.

¹¹ Charles Coleman Sellers, "Peale's Museum," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 43, no. 1 (1953): accessed May 3, 2018, JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1005678>. Pg. 253.

¹² Lillian B. Miller, ed., *The Collected Papers of Charles Willson Peale and His Family: A Guide and Index to the Microfiche Edition* (Millwood, NY: Kraus Microform, 1980). Pg. 13.

become a source of wealth to him.”¹³ His letters of that time confirm this intention, as he wrote that he “expected [his] labors be paid for speedily” and couched the museum in terms of being “not so profitable as expected.”¹⁴¹⁵

As such, what would become the Philadelphia Museum is best understood as a fundamentally entrepreneurial investment for Peale, one that forced Peale to take substantial risks. Historian Sally Kohlstedt made a similar claim in her article for *Mermaids, Mummies, and Mastodons: The Emergence of the American Museum*, bifurcating early American collecting as so: “One model was that of the entrepreneurs for whom a museum was also a means of livelihood, and the other involved the specialized natural history societies whose amateur members pooled intellectual resources and artifacts”.¹⁶ Although Kohlstedt is right to notice Peale’s entrepreneurial tendencies, her binary is unhelpful, a fact she seems to realize but not clarify, as she characterizes Peale as both an “entrepreneur” and an “amateur” in successive sentences.¹⁷ (For one, Peale relied on the American Philosophical Society for display space. Moreover, as will be explained in successive pages, the Peale Museum relied on pooled artifacts and intellectual resources even as it was the sole occupation of Peale—the two are not mutually exclusive.) Kohlstedt moves on to conclude that “For Peale [...] the pursuit of science was spurred by multiple incentives, including profit.”¹⁸ This is a cursory treatment of a phenomenon

¹³ Charles Willson Peale, *Charles Willson Peale's Autobiography*, ed. Sellers, 1826, Unpublished unfinished autobiography. Sterling Library Microfiche Collection, New Haven, CT. The Peale Family Papers, II-C, Card 6. Accessed May 05, 2018.

¹⁴ Dr. Sir," letter from Charles Willson Peale, December 18, 1785, Sterling Library Microfiche Collection, New Haven, CT. The Peale Family Papers, Series II-A, Card 14. Accessed May 02, 2018.

¹⁵ "CWP to Gen. George Weedon," Charles Willson Peale to George Weedon, July 13, 1785, Sterling Library Microfiche Collection, New Haven, CT. The Peale Family Papers, Series II-A, Card 14. Accessed May 02, 2018.

¹⁶ Sally Gregory Kohlstedt, "Entrepreneurs and Intellectuals: Natural History in Early American Museums," in *Mermaids, Mummies, and Mastodons: The Emergence of the American Museum*, ed. William T. Alderson (Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museums, 1992). Pg. 23.

¹⁷ Ibid. Pgs. 23-24.

¹⁸ Ibid. Pg. 24.

that deserves concerted emphasis. Collections in Europe almost all accrued over a lifetime spent doing something unrelated, or collecting-adjacent—rarely, if ever, was a collection the be-all and end-all source of income. Early modern pharmacists and taxidermists acquired collections as collateral for their main livelihood. Nobles like the Medicis or the inheritors of the Louvre used collections to inflate prestige, but they had sizable coffers that supported their indulgent accumulation. A century earlier, naturalists like Volckamer and Petiver were entrepreneurs of a sort, but their gift economy meant that their correspondences did not abound with the same sort of explicitly financial discourse as did Peale's.¹⁹ Even Hans Sloane, Peale's pseudo-hero, was able to marry into a sugar plantation fortune to continue his collecting.²⁰ Peale's choice to abandon his painting career and go all-in on the nascent concept of a ticketed museum, then, was veritably unprecedented.

Pulling off such a pivot necessitated Peale become not only a shrewd and uncompromising businessman, but utterly obsessed with his museum. He did just that. So much so that, following the untimely death of Rachel Brewer, his first wife, he sent a letter that mourned her passing in one breath and wondered at “what encouragement will be given to my Museum by the Purchase of Tickets” in the next.²¹ Moreover, a museum of natural history was not Peale's first money-making epiphany. His August 29, 1785 posting in *The Pennsylvania Packet* advertised “his Exhibition of Perspective Views with gentle Effects; or Nature delineated

¹⁹ Tomomi Kinukawa, *Learned vs. Commercial? The Commodification of Nature in Early Modern Natural History Specimen Exchanges in England, Germany, and the Netherlands* 43, no. 5 (November 2013): accessed October 1, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/hsns.2013.43.5.589>. Pgs. 596-598.

²⁰ "Sir Hans Sloane," British Museum, 2017, accessed May 07, 2018, http://www.britishmuseum.org/about_us/the_museums_story/general_history/sir_hans_sloane.aspx.

²¹ "CWP to Sir --." Charles Willson Peale to Unknown. April 26, 1790. Sterling Library Microfiche Collection, New Haven, CT. The Peale Family Papers, Series II-A, Card 16. Accessed May 02, 2018.

in and in Motion,” for which he sold 35-cent tickets.²² Elsewhere referred to as moving pictures, this vision of an art-exclusive exhibition didn’t make Peale enough money to stay afloat. Only on recommendation of a trusted friend, Professor Robert Patterson (who also gifted Peale his first specimen, a paddlefish), did he switch to natural history collecting.²³ Thus, Peale’s Philadelphia Museum was not predetermined or ‘meant to be.’ Had Rachel Brewer been slightly poorer or Peale slightly less impulsively entrepreneurial, it very well could never have come to fruition.

Peale the Democrat

Swept up by the egalitarianism of the Furious Whigs and the general, increasingly global move toward democracy, Peale declared in a letter to Admiral John Hawkins that his Philadelphia Museum, as well as all other institutions of good standing, should exist “for a public benefit.”²⁴ But that benefit couldn’t be sustained pro bono—Peale clarified that they should incur “a public charge.”²⁵ Peale leveraged this concept of reciprocity in the hopes of creating a unique image of the Philadelphia Museum in the public eye, seen as both a resource and a good cause. The crowd-sourced collection that resulted was advertised as the pinnacle of Linnaean order, but varied in its scientific strictness over time (and space) in response to citizenry donations and demands.

With this in mind, biographer Sellers went as far as to declare the Philadelphia Museum “the first modern museum in that it sought not only to aid the scholar but to teach the

²² Charles Willson Peale, "Advertisement for Mr. Peale's Exhibition," advertisement, *The Pennsylvania Packet*, August 29, 1785. The Peale Family Papers, Series II-A, Card 21. Accessed May 02, 2018.

²³ Charles Coleman Sellers, "Peale's Museum," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 43, no. 1 (1953): accessed May 3, 2018, JSTOR <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1005678>. Pg. 254.

²⁴ Ruth Helm, "Peale's Museum: Politics, Idealism, and Public Patronage in the Early Republic," in *Mermaids, Mummies, and Mastodons: The Emergence of the American Museum*, ed. William T. Alderson (Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museums, 1992). Pg. 69

²⁵ Ibid.

populace.”²⁶ Sellers perhaps overreaches in his eagerness to crown Peale as “the first”—the Louvre and the British Museum were undergoing similar developments during the turn of the century—but he’s right to note Peale’s care for public pedagogy.²⁷ He emblazoned “Whoso would learn Wisdom, let him enter here!” slogan-like atop its entrance and had blank subscription letters made up that read, “To advance the interest of the Museum, or Repository of Nature and Art, is indirectly conducing to the public benefit.”²⁸ Peale was not operating “above it all” as a transcendent dispenser of scientific intel, but was concerned about his museum’s public image.³⁰ He had to be. Because Peale received no monetary support from the government or the city, he relied on regular Americans both for money and for objects. He did much of this sourcing himself; he wrote a letter in 1787 to congratulate a friend on marriage and “hope you find leisure to procure me the skin of an Alligator of a large size if they are to be had at this season of the year.”³¹ Indeed, in 1789, a Mr. James Cox, deputized to help collect and safeguard specimens on behalf of Peale, sent him a letter from the field: “I have been [...] constantly laboring to get the necessary support for my family, and preserving articles for the Museum. I have classed and numbered every thing, and hope to live to see this Museum become something

²⁶ Charles Coleman Sellers, “Peale’s Museum,” *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 43, no. 1 (1953): accessed May 3, 2018, JSTOR <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1005678>. Pg. 254.

²⁷ Andrew McClellan, *Inventing the Louvre: Art, Politics, and the Origins of the Modern Museum in Eighteenth-century Paris* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2009). Ch. 2.

²⁸ Andrea Stulman Dennett, *Weird and Wonderful: The Dime Museum in America* (New York: New York University Press, 1997). Pg. 13.

²⁹ Copy of subscription letter (from the museum microfiche)

³⁰ Gary Kulik, “Introduction,” in *Mermaids, Mummies, and Mastodons: The Emergence of the American Museum*, ed. William T. Alderson (Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museums, 1992). Pg. 11

³¹ “I Congratulate You on Your Late Marriage.” Charles Willson Peale to Unknown. February 2, 1787. Sterling Library Microfiche Collection, New Haven, CT. The Peale Family Papers, Series II-A, Card 14. Accessed May 02, 2018.

tolerable.”³² Albany was not alone in engaging with Peale’s purpose and identifying with the museum’s mission. On the backs of citizen scientists like him, the museum’s collected artifacts grew to over ten thousand by 1820.³³

Despite Peale’s assertion that his Philadelphia Museum was “displayed with scientific method and pleasing neatness,” the vast collection was in places more amalgamative than structured.³⁴ In the same 1814 broadside in which Peale made said claim, he enumerated the collection as featuring:

miscellaneous curiosities, amounting to near 8000 articles; various optical amusements, and Lukens’s model of Perpetual Motion; [...] Wax Figures of Indians habited in their own dresses, Instruments of War, Tools, Dresses; [...] and lastly, separated from this room, in a private apartment, a variety of Anatomical preparations, double headed animals, deformities, skeletons, etc.³⁵

In other words, Peale was not discerning in his acquisitions, resulting in a list of objects more like Borgesian chaotic enumeration than the pleasing neatness of the Linnean method. (The science of taxonomy was also relatively new, so this would have sounded less sundry to Peale’s contemporaries than it might to a 21st-century reader.) This contradiction may seem scientifically suspect, but it made business sense at the time. Peale cultivated the best of both worlds: a reputation for rigor and scientific ethos with the simultaneous capacity to entertain his guests. His taxidermy practices meant that guests couldn’t interact with displays—a sign advised, “Do not touch the birds as they are covered with arsenic Poison”—like they may have been

³² Do Not Complain of My Neglect of Writing." James Cox to Charles Willson Peale. April 27, 1789. Sterling Library Microfiche Collection, New Haven, CT. The Peale Family Papers, Series II-A, Card 16. Accessed May 02, 2018.

³³ Hart Sidney Hart and David C. Ward, "The Waning of an Enlightenment Ideal: Charles Willson Peale's Philadelphia Museum, 1790- 1820," *Journal of the Early Republic* 8, no. 4 (1988): accessed May 05, 2018, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3123178>.

³⁴ Peale's Museum. Broadside. "Historical Catalogue of the Paintings to Be Had at the Door." News release, Philadelphia, PA, 1814. Sterling Library Microfiche Collection, New Haven, CT. The Peale Family Papers, Series XI-A, Card 2. Accessed May 05, 2018.

³⁵ Ibid.

accustomed to in more personal collections, so he balanced that alienation out with newfangled, entertaining *scientifica* like “Hawkins ingenious Physiognotrace,” which could map someone’s profile, and an Organ “for the use of such Visitors as are acquainted with music.”³⁶³⁷ This cognitively dissonant collection was a product of its transitional time, like neither the *Wunderkammern* that came before it nor the monolithic Museums of Only Science or Museums of Only Art that were to follow. Peale’s vision was a business for the people, and the people’s vision was for a museum like Peale’s, democratic in its tastes and origins, diverse in its offerings.

Peale the Patriot

If Peale’s collecting was a product of democracy, so too was it a vector of nationalism. In 1786, he mailed a letter to soon-to-be-President George Washington stating his “Intention to collect every thing that is curious of the Country and to arrange them in the best manner I am able, [...] thereby hoping to retain with so many things [sic] curious which would otherwise be out to Europe.”³⁸ This competitive, even protectionist language is not accidental. As museums accessible to the public grew in popularity across the Western world, Peale and his admirers saw an opportunity to distinguish America from its European counterparts, who had gotten centuries of a head start. To do so, they sought both to emulate and distance themselves from the collectors on the other side of the Atlantic.

Peale did not just use nationalistic language in conversation with the commander-in-chief. His 1792 broadside, published in newspapers up and down the Eastern Seaboard, spoke of

³⁶ Sally Gregory Kohlstedt, “Entrepreneurs and Intellectuals: Natural History in Early American Museums,” in *Mermaids, Mummies, and Mastodons: The Emergence of the American Museum*, ed. William T. Alderson (Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museums, 1992). Pg. 26.

³⁷ Lillian B. Miller, ed., *The Collected Papers of Charles Willson Peale and His Family: A Guide and Index to the Microfiche Edition* (Millwood, NY: Kraus Microform, 1980). Pg. 3

³⁸ “CWP to G. Washington.” Charles Willson Peale to George Washington. December 31, 1786. Sterling Library Microfiche Collection, New Haven, CT. The Peale Family Papers, Series II-A, Card 15. Accessed May 02, 2018.

his hope that the Philadelphia Museum would “grow into full maturity, and become a National Museum.”³⁹ By this, he meant not only that the museum would be representative of America, but that it would become public in the civic sense of the word, owned by the government like “all the Museums of the great European nations [which] have risen from the foundations laid by individuals.”⁴⁰ Despite frequent protestations to Peale’s friend and muse Thomas Jefferson, this trajectory was not to be, as no federal funds ever made their way to Peale’s hands.⁴¹ Instead, Jefferson encouraged Peale to differentiate his collection from the Europeans. In fact, Jefferson was rather disparaging of those European nations’ museum practices. One of his frequent letters to Peale recollected that museums separated visiting times and set different prices for “the decent part” of the populace versus for the “pickpockets, chimney sweeps, etc.”⁴² Whether or not Jefferson’s impressions were accurate—he didn’t specify which country or museum(s) he had in mind—they betray his and Peale’s urge to do things differently, even as they appreciated the legacy of those who had come before.

Their opportunity to do so came in June of 1801, when Peale caught wind that gigantic bones had been found in the mud of rural Ulster county in New York.⁴³ In perhaps his most prescient decision as a businessman curator, he and a team of excavators headed out there and purchased the right to the bones from the men who owned the land for fifty dollars and a gun.⁴⁴

³⁹ Charles Coleman Sellers, "Peale's Museum," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 43, no. 1 (1953): accessed May 3, 2018, JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1005678>. Pg. 255

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ "Letters of Thomas Jefferson to Chas. Willson Peale." Thomas Jefferson to Charles Willson Peale. January 14, 1802. Sterling Library Microfiche Collection, New Haven, CT. The Peale Family Papers, Series II-A, Card 25. Accessed May 02, 2018.

⁴² "Letters of Thomas Jefferson to Chas. Willson Peale." Thomas Jefferson to Charles Willson Peale. May 5, 1802. Sterling Library Microfiche Collection, New Haven, CT. The Peale Family Papers, Series II-A, Card 25. Accessed May 02, 2018.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Diary of Charles Willson Peale. Entry 33. 1801. Sterling Library Microfiche Collection, New Haven, CT. The Peale Family Papers, Series II-B, Card 17. Accessed May 02, 2018.

During the months of grueling digging, Peale found a loophole to the lack of government funding. Thomas Jefferson, so excited by the prospect of acquiring a full mammoth skeleton (what is now understood to be a mastodon), chipped in for the purchase of a water pump to speed up the process.⁴⁵ Once Peale had successfully extracted the bones, Jefferson wrote to “congratulate [Peale] on obtaining a complete skeleton” and lauded his “zeal enough to devote himself to the recovery of these great animal monuments.”⁴⁶ Jefferson’s diction is telling. That a skeleton could be both “animal” and “monument” meant that it could be both natural and artificial, as if finding and displaying the skeleton made it seem like it was created for America. Indeed, the fervor for the mammoth—it attracted larger crowds than the Philadelphia Museum had yet seen, and cost twice as much as regular admission—seems an extension of Winthrop’s “city upon a hill”: mastodon as hill, America as city.⁴⁷ Sellers said as much, arguing that “Peale’s discovery brought ‘mammoth’ into our language as synonymous with anything great, large, spacious, noble, American.”⁴⁸ In an 1805 guide to the Philadelphia Museum, Peale called the Mastodon Room “as valuable as it is stupendous.”⁴⁹ Indeed, its very visual spectacle was as important to him as its scientific relevance. No mammals of comparable size were popularly

⁴⁵ John W. Durel, "In Pursuit of a Profit," in *Mermaids, Mummies, and Mastodons: The Emergence of the American Museum*, ed. William T. Alderson (Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museums, 1992). Pg. 43

⁴⁶ "Letters of Thomas Jefferson to Chas. Willson Peale." Thomas Jefferson to Charles Willson Peale. July 29, 1801. Sterling Library Microfiche Collection, New Haven, CT. The Peale Family Papers, Series II-A, Card 24. Accessed May 02, 2018.

⁴⁷ Sally Gregory Kohlstedt, "Entrepreneurs and Intellectuals: Natural History in Early American Museums," in *Mermaids, Mummies, and Mastodons: The Emergence of the American Museum*, ed. William T. Alderson (Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museums, 1992). Pg. 26

⁴⁸ Charles Coleman Sellers, "Peale's Museum," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 43, no. 1 (1953): accessed May 3, 2018, JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1005678>. Pg. 256

⁴⁹ Peale, Charles Willson. *Guide to the Philadelphia Museum: Admittance 25 Cents*. [Philadelphia]: (From the Museum Press--), 1805. Sterling Library Microfiche Collection, New Haven, CT. The Peale Family Papers, Series XI-A, Card 5. Accessed May 05, 2018.

displayed in Europe at the time.⁵⁰ The existence of such a beast – which Peale mistakenly interpreted as carnivorous, rotating the tusks 180 degrees so that they curved menacingly downwards—seemed to invoke the blessed destiny of the new nation, already looking westward with the Louisiana Purchase under Jefferson’s belt.

But what often is elided from this discourse on noble national pride is the way it both othered and exerted ownership over Native Americans. Almost all of the text on the first broadside Peale published about the discovery was “a Tradition, as delivered in the very terms of a Shawanee Indian.”⁵¹ The narrative tells of a time ten thousand years ago, “long before pale men,” when one mammoth, “the uncontrolled Monarch of the Wilderness,” challenged the sovereignty of their pagan Good Spirit and was memorialized in the West for awesome posterity.⁵² Peale went on to imply that he had unearthed that “antique wonder of North America,” which he asserts to be “the largest of all Terrestrial Beings!”⁵³ *Exotica*, artifacts from the Far East or New World, had long been a staple of European collecting. Peale’s museum, sharing a continent with that New World, turned the foreign into the domestic and let the exotic cohabit with the local. By recounting the entirety of this supposed Native American legend, then referring to it as “nothing but a confused traditions among the natives of our country,” Peale legitimized his new nation’s claim to the bones while delegitimizing the people whose land they had taken the bones from.⁵⁴ In doing so, Peale exemplified his, and, by extension, his country’s,

⁵⁰ Paul Semonin, "Peale's Mastodon: The Skeleton in Our Closet," *Common-Place*, January 2004, accessed May 06, 2018, <http://www.common-place-archives.org/vol-04/no-02/semonin/>.

⁵¹ Peale, Charles Willson. *Skeleton of the Mammoth Is Now to Be Seen at the Museum in a Separate Room*. Philadelphia: Peale's Museum, 1801. Sterling Library Microfiche Collection, New Haven, CT. The Peale Family Papers, Series XI-A, Card 5. Accessed May 05, 2018.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

patriotism—borne from the forms of other nations, but made to seem apart from them: an exceptional exception.

The Peale Museum's Epilogue

In an ironic twist, the mastodon that Peale and Jefferson imagined as echt- and ur-American was eventually sold to collectors in Germany to pay off creditors.⁵⁵ After a few decades of flourish, the Peale Museum and its peers in Baltimore and New York had fallen back into their creators' original problem: debt.⁵⁶ The man who (partially) bought them out was P. T. Barnum, whose eclectic, circus-like museums ushered in the next, more artificial archetype of the collection in American history.⁵⁷ Peale's epoch was over.

The Peale Museum occupied a liminal moment in the history of the American experiment, as well as in the tradition of collecting and exhibiting. Its founder and figurehead was an entrepreneur first and a scientist second. He wanted to educate Americans, but he also wanted to please them. He cared deeply for his country, but envied the collections of those on other shores. His contradictions made his museum work, and, after some time, stop working.

Through it all, Peale had no way of knowing that his most important act of preservation would perhaps be that of his own writing. He saved journal entries, letters, and documents. He transcribed pamphlets and tickets. And he typed many of them up in full, preserving them in anticipation of those who would struggle to read his impassive but artful script. For this reason,

⁵⁵ Paul Semonin, "Peale's Mastodon: The Skeleton in Our Closet," *Common-Place*, January 2004, accessed May 06, 2018, <http://www.common-place-archives.org/vol-04/no-02/semonin/>.

⁵⁶ Sally Gregory Kohlstedt, "Entrepreneurs and Intellectuals: Natural History in Early American Museums," in *Mermaids, Mummies, and Mastodons: The Emergence of the American Museum*, ed. William T. Alderson (Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museums, 1992). Pg. 28

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

his legacy, and his complications, live on, a reminder that history is never as neat as it purports to be.

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