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Illusion and Allusion

Charles Willson Peale's Staircase Group at the Columbianum Exhibition

Wendy Bellion

One of the tallest tales in American art history begins as a parable of social modesty. In April 1856 Rembrandt Peale (1778–1860) wrote an article entitled “The Person and Mien of Washington” for the *Crayon*, a literary journal. The essay professed that George Washington, renowned for his political accomplishments, was also a pillar of etiquette. To impress the point upon his readers, Peale claimed that the president had even paid “polite respect to a *picture*” during a visit to the Philadelphia Museum:

My father [Charles Willson Peale] had invited the General to see some Indian [wax-works] dressed in their proper habiliments. A painting, which he had just finished, was placed in the room leading to the Indian department. The painting represented my elder brother, with palette in hand, as stepping up a stairway, and a younger brother looking down. I observed that Washington, as he passed it, bowed politely to the painted figures, which he afterwards acknowledged he thought were living persons. If this first homage bestowed on the picture was not indicative of its merit, it was, at least, another instance of habitual politeness.

Charles Willson Peale, *Staircase Group (Portrait of Raphaelle Peale and Titian Ramsay Peale)*, 1795. Oil, 89 ½ x 39 ¾ in., shown as installed in a modern doorframe at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, George W. Elkins Collection

Reiterated endlessly in twentieth-century studies of American art and the Peale family, the story of Washington's deception at

the hands of Charles Willson Peale (1741–1827) helped crown the *Staircase Group* (frontispiece) as an icon of trompe l'oeil art—a pictorial deception. Although scholars have recently expressed doubt about the veracity of Rembrandt Peale's report, noting that his account followed a literary convention that celebrated artists who deceived authority figures, the legend remains alive and well in popular literature and children's books (fig. 1).¹

To regard the *Staircase Group* as a trompe l'oeil painting, however—whether or not one accepts Rembrandt Peale's version of events—is to see only half the picture, for the work was presented to its audience as a portrait at its initial showing in 1795. The painting, then entitled *Whole Length—Portraits of Two of His Sons on a Staircase*, was one of five portraits Charles Willson Peale displayed at the Columbianum, an exhibition mounted in the Pennsylvania State House to honor the establishment of the nation's first art academy. The two sons in question were Raphaelle Peale (1774–1825), who poses with a painter's accoutrements at the base of the stairs, and Titian Ramsay Peale I (1780–1798), who peers around the left edge of the stairwell. As a portrait, the *Staircase Group* vexed Peale historian Charles Coleman Sellers, who ultimately concluded, after discussing the picture in



several books, that it “violated all the fixed conventions of normal portraiture of the time” and hence should be regarded mainly as an “eye fooler.” Other scholars have posited brief interpretations of the figures as allegories of childhood and artistic progress, but their analyses neglect the painting’s deceptive qualities.²

To fully understand the visual and conceptual games that the *Staircase Group* enacted in 1795, the painting’s operations as portrait and trompe l’oeil demand equal, and integrated, consideration. The following pages reconstruct Peale’s installation of the *Staircase Group* in the State House, arguing that he conceived the painting in direct relation to the establishment of the Columbianum academy and its inaugural exhibition. In manifold ways, the picture punned upon its architectural surroundings and slyly visualized the academy’s pedagogical ideals. Setting the painting within its original context of display reveals its tricks to be richer than presumed and shows that trompe l’oeil’s dialectics extended well beyond deception.

The Columbianum Academy and Exhibition

Charles Willson Peale was already a major figure in the cultural life of the early American republic when he assumed an active role in organizing the Columbianum. Following a brief period of study in Benjamin West’s London studio, the Maryland native returned home to establish himself as the mid-Atlantic region’s premier portraitist. In the early 1780s he founded the Philadelphia Museum, also known as Peale’s Museum, an institution that would eventually include hundreds of pictures and thousands of natural history specimens. When he painted the *Staircase Group* in 1795, Peale had paradoxically “bid adieu to portrait painting,” as he announced in a Philadelphia newspaper of April 1794, in order to concentrate on his museum. Reluctant to withdraw entirely from artistic activities, however, he couched his retirement in a manner designed to encourage continuing patronage of his family: in his stead Peale



Kathy Osborn, illustration of George Washington being deceived by the *Staircase Group*, 1993. From Michael O. Tunnell, *The Joke's on George* (Honesdale, Pennsylvania: Boyds Mills Press, 2001)

- 2 James Trenchard, *View of Several Public Buildings in Philadelphia*, 1790. Engraving, 5 x 8 ¼ in. Originally appeared in *Columbian Magazine*, January 1790. Library Company of Philadelphia

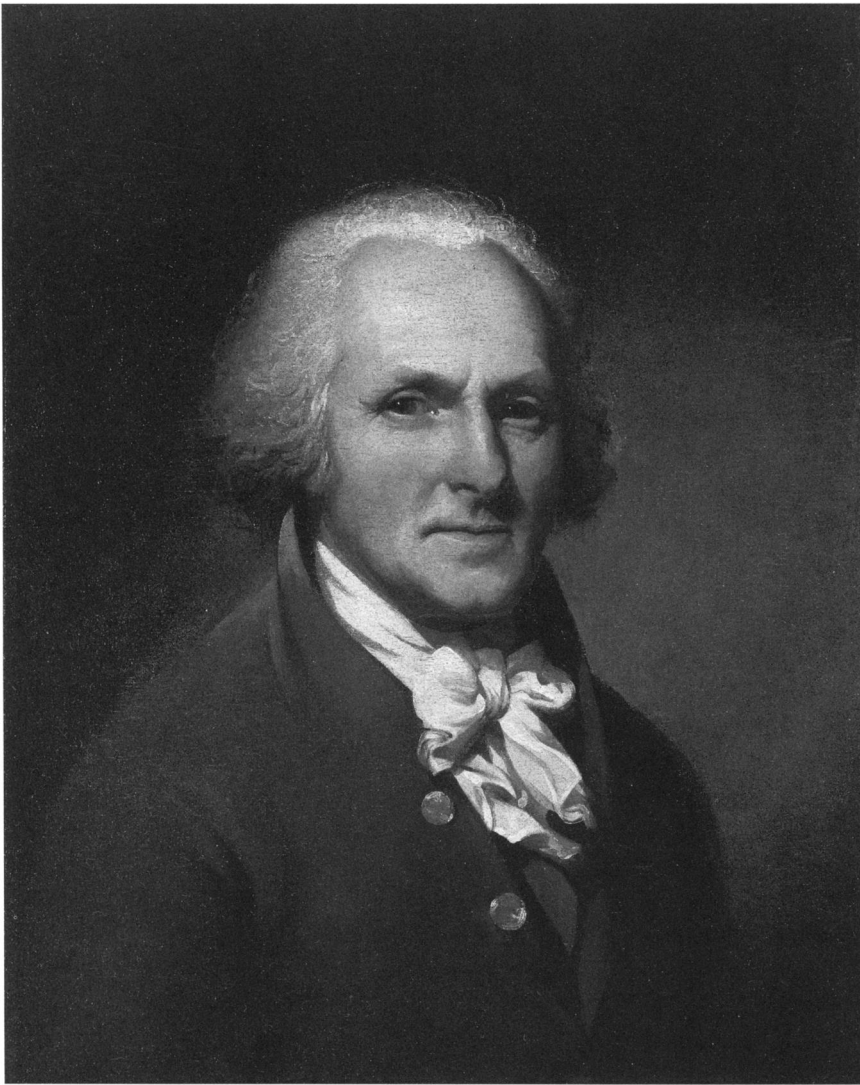


recommended “his sons Raphael and Rembrandt as portrait painters, whose likenesses, and the excellency of their coloring . . . will give general satisfaction.” The *Staircase Group* would likewise help sustain the Peales’ visibility within Philadelphia’s art community.³

Peale’s Museum hosted the first meeting of the Columbianum on December 29, 1794. The museum was then housed in Philosophical Hall, the headquarters of the American Philosophical Society, in the yard of the Pennsylvania State House—the city’s geographic and symbolic center. A contemporary print (fig. 2) shows the State House, with its prominent bell tower, facing south from the center of the composition; Philosophical Hall stands directly to the right. It was here that sixteen men, including sculptor William Rush, Irish engraver John James Barralet, and Baptist clergyman Burgess Allison, gathered on December 29 to affirm their support for the “protection and encouragement of the fine arts.” Their goal was to establish the first art academy in the United States, and they devised a name that would associate the fledgling school with familiar signs of national origin: “Columbianum” readily connoted “Christopher Columbus” or his female namesake “Columbia,” the figurative emblem of the new republic. In January 1795 the Columbianum attracted another fourteen members and drafted a

preliminary constitution. The academy’s members resolved to collect a library of art books and plaster casts of classical sculptures; they designated instructors of painting, anatomy, and perspective; and they began teaching drawing classes at Peale’s Museum.⁴

Famously, these plans collapsed within a few months. Scholars have long attributed the Columbianum’s speedy dissolution to its introduction of nude models into drawing classes, a practice that was common in European art academies but unprecedented in North America. The potential impropriety of life classes, it has been supposed, exacerbated concerns that the arts were symptoms of luxury, a suspected agent of vice, and therefore inimical to a republic founded upon ideals of virtue. But there is limited evidence that the life classes caused disruption. The most scandalous documentation is anecdotal: Rembrandt Peale claimed that his father voluntarily stripped for a class when a baker hired for the occasion fled the studio in embarrassment. More consequential factors probably instigated the Columbianum’s premature demise. Soon after the academy was organized, members became embroiled in a fierce disagreement concerning its long-term future. Peale found his leadership challenged, and his creation of the *Staircase Group* may have been shaped in part by this experience.⁵



3 Charles Willson Peale, *Self-portrait*, ca. 1791. Oil, 25 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 20 $\frac{3}{8}$ in. National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

The problem concerned the extent to which the Columbianum should be modeled upon London's Royal Academy, established in 1769 under the direction of Sir Joshua Reynolds. In the first of his fifteen *Discourses* for the academy, Reynolds aligned artistic accomplishment with national identity, explaining that England had long awaited "an ornament so suited to its greatness." The institution aimed to supply "materials on which genius is to work," namely "able men to direct the student" and a collection of "great examples of the art," he said. Reynolds inspired a number of the Columbianum's founders to conceive similar ambitions. Indeed several

presumed that "something on the plan of the British Academy," as amateur architect Samuel Blodgett put it, was intended from the outset. Blodgett, together with a handful of artists who had trained in England, rallied around William Groombridge, an immigrant British landscape painter who endorsed the development of a school on "a broad and enlarged scale, suitable to that open and liberal mode of thinking and acting which characterizes an enlightened nation." For these individuals, the Royal Academy served as a conceptual prototype, an exemplar of pedagogical theory and cultural achievement. Groombridge and his supporters insisted that George Washington, who was nearing the end of his second presidential term, should be appointed honorary patron of the Columbianum, just as George III was the symbolic head of the Royal Academy. "The president is much delighted with [the academy] and will, when it is in a riper state, become the principal patron," Robert Field, a British portraitist, commented in a letter to aspiring art collector Robert Gilmore Jr.⁶

These ideas seem well intentioned and innocent in hindsight, but they touched off fireworks in 1795. The proposal to create an academy office with a monarchical parallel and to appoint an elected president to that post infuriated the many founders of the Columbianum who supported the egalitarian politics of Jeffersonian republicanism. Equally worrisome was the prospect of a national academy. Informed by anti-Federalist rhetoric about direct citizen participation in local political spheres, Peale (fig. 3) and his friends interpreted the meaning of "national" literally and protested that Pennsylvania artists had no right to determine the interests of artists who resided in other states. When Groombridge's allies mocked this objection as a "perverting and cramping [of] the original idea of a National College into a narrow and contracted plan of an Academical Drawing School," a member of the Peale camp sprang to the defense. "Is it

ridiculous . . . to have a regard for our fellow citizens in the other states & consult them about the establishment of a supremacy over them before the thing was carried into effect? We are not in a monarchical subordination here, ready to receive anything which shall be condescendingly propagated from the seat of government," the writer argued in the *Aurora General Advertiser*.⁷

During the second week of February the collective divided into two groups, each laying claim to the title "Columbianum." The breakup sparked an angry standoff in the daily newspapers, fueled by writers who contrived Latinate pseudonyms such as "Philadelphiensis" and "Philo-Columbianesis." The debate was marked by xenophobia, accusations of deceit, and contestation regarding "the original and real Columbianum"—an issue the *Staircase Group* would try to settle. Peale's supporters warned that the secessionist "National College" was "a decoy to artists and an imposition on the public." The breakaway organization that met at Groombridge's house responded by imploring "the party at Peale's Museum" to "no longer torment or disgrace themselves with their pitiful quibbles and phraseological assortment of *stratagems, deceptions, impostures, arrogance, vanity*, and the rest of the nomenclature which bring up the train of their frivolous scurrility." Peale's side countered by observing "the shifts employed by the Anglo-Columbianum. At one moment they assume the entire credit of originality, at another they are more modest, and only wish 'to lend a helping hand'. . . Strange that *eight foreigners* should assume the name of Columbianum . . . and then say that they only wish to lend a helping hand! What a set of purblind creatures must not Americans be supposed when such pitiful tricks are attempted to be palmed on them."⁸

Benjamin Franklin Bache, editor of the newspaper in which much of this discourse transpired, brought the bickering to an abrupt conclusion in early March.

Noting that subscribers had complained about the "length and uninteresting nature of the altercation concerning the Columbianum," he announced that further publicity would be restricted to advertisements. The decision may have sealed the fate of Groombridge's cause: no further agitation on his behalf appeared in print. Peale's colleagues, however, published a lengthy declaration cum advertisement in Bache's *Aurora General Advertiser* on April 8. Dismissing the recent debacle as an unfortunate contest of "jealousy and ill will," the text foresaw a new era of democratic opportunity in the arts. "A West, a Copley, and a Trumbull" already had proven the abilities of American artists abroad; now private citizens were encouraged to help cultivate "the rising genius of the American Republic" by directing their "leisure and opulence" toward support of painters at home.⁹

Peale's group succeeded in organizing the event for which the Columbianum is best remembered: a grand exhibition—the likes of which most Americans had never before experienced—held in the Pennsylvania State House from late May through early July. It was expected to be the first in a series of annual spring exhibitions, and in preparation the school temporarily suspended classes on May 1. (It did not restore them after the exhibition—another factor in the academy's demise.) Early that month, Columbianum secretary Samuel Lewis invited the submission of artworks that were "fit for the public eye" and not previously included in "any public exhibition in the United States of America." Practicing artists and amateur enthusiasts responded with excitement. Over three dozen Americans and European immigrants sent about 150 works of art to the State House. Portraits constituted nearly half of the exhibition and included likenesses of Washington, Jefferson, painters Benjamin West and Angelica Kauffman, poet Phillis Wheatley, and astronomer David Rittenhouse. Other artistic genres and

media, such as prints, architectural drawings, and model ships, rounded out the exhibition. The American republic was embodied in the form of an allegorical sculpture, and landscapes of Philadelphia complemented views of London. Still-life paintings entitled *Dutch Cheese*, *Herrings* and *Ribs of Raw Beef* joined *Four Fruit Pieces* and *A Wood Duck*, both attributed to John Singleton Copley. Members of the Peale family accounted for nearly one-fifth of the objects displayed.¹⁰

The Columbianum exhibition also featured at least five trompe l'oeil pictures. Lewis, a talented penman and prolific cartographer, offered three works entitled *A Deception*. Raphaelle Peale likewise submitted one *Deception* together with a dozen still-lives and portraits.¹¹ His father sent five portraits, including *Whole Length—Portraits of Two of His Sons on a Staircase*. The *Staircase Group*, as the painting is known today, was an oddity in Peale's oeuvre. The scale of the canvas exceeded the usual dimensions of his work,

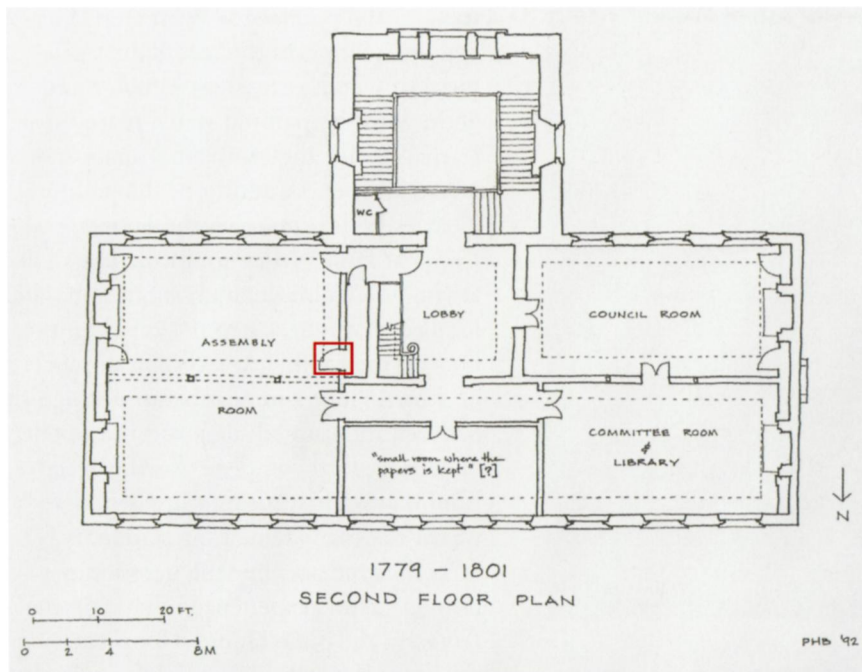
and although Peale had long cultivated a naturalistic style, this was his first attempt at trompe l'oeil depiction. None of his other paintings, moreover, so complexly refer to the circumstances of their creation and exhibition. *Staircase Group* registered the Columbianum's anxieties about deception and introduced new specters of substitution.

The *Staircase Group* in the Pennsylvania State House

The *Staircase Group* was a site-specific painting, made for and intended to be seen within a particular location in the Pennsylvania State House (fig. 4). The building's history made it an especially fitting place to display a masterpiece of virtual representation. Revolutionary-era legislators had met there to deliberate competing models of political representation and frame the architecture of the federal government. The State House,



4 William Birch, *Back of the State House*, 1799. Etching and engraving with watercolor, 12 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 15 $\frac{1}{2}$ in., from *The City of Philadelphia in the State of Pennsylvania, North America; as it appeared in the Year 1800* (Published by W. Birch, Springland Cot, near Neshaminy Bridge on the Bristol Road, Pa., 1800). Library Company of Philadelphia



5 Second floor plan, 1779–1801, from Penelope Hartshorne Batcheler, *Independence Hall Historic Structures Report. Part II Portion: The Physical History of the Second Floor* (Philadelphia: Independence National Historical Park, 1992). The Columbianum Exhibition was held in the Senate Chamber, marked “Assembly Room.” A red box is added here to mark the proposed location of the *Staircase Group*.

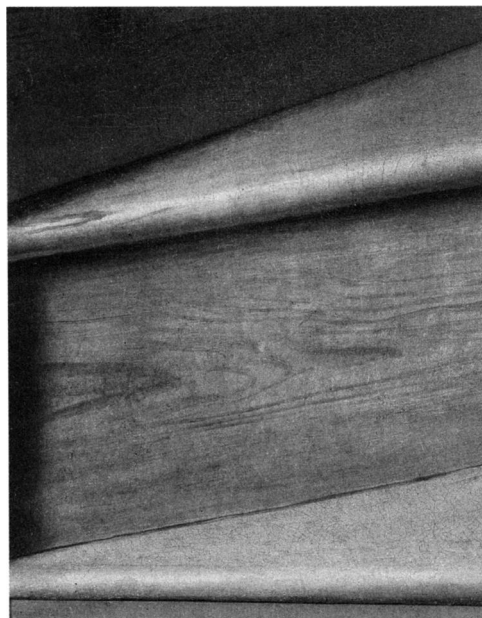
constructed in 1732 and renovated numerous times thereafter, was the capitol for Pennsylvania’s representatives, councils, and Supreme Court. In 1774 and 1776 it hosted the First and Second Continental Congresses, at which independence from Great Britain was debated and declared; the following decade, it served as home to the Congress of the Confederation and the Constitutional Convention. In 1820 it was renamed Independence Hall in commemoration of these epochal meetings.

To mount an art exhibition on this hallowed ground was to appropriate a space laden with political significance for cultural purposes. The choice of the site may have been deliberate in this regard, for the building’s history added credibility to the Columbianum’s self-promotion as a republican institution. But practical considerations may also have steered the exhibition organizers to the State House: the structure boasted one of the largest rooms in Philadelphia, the Pennsylvania Senate Chamber. The room measured forty feet square and comprised the eastern half of the second floor, providing ample space for a large art exhibition (the

Chamber is designated “Assembly Room” in fig. 5). Tall windows spanned the north and south walls, and there was little decoration to compete with the display of art objects: the walls were whitewashed and modestly ornamented by several doorframes and an Ionic crown and corona.¹²

The doorframes are of special interest because art historians have long supposed, despite the absence of supporting research, that Peale installed his *Staircase Group* within an existing doorway. Recent architectural studies of the State House, together with the visual evidence of the painting itself, allow this assumption to be tested. In preparation for the current restoration of the State House to its appearance of 1776, scholars conducted architectural excavations revealing that the Senate Chamber had five doorways at the time of the Columbianum exhibition. A set of double doors in the north section of the room probably served as the main entrance. Four doorframes capped by pediments occupied the room’s southern half. Three of these concealed closets: two flanked a fireplace in the eastern wall, and a third was cut into the western wall south of the double doors. The fourth doorway, in the southwest corner, opened onto a narrow passageway that led to the second-floor lobby.¹³

In which, if any, of these spaces might Peale have displayed the *Staircase Group*? The double doors and the southwest corner door can be eliminated from consideration, for they provided access to the Senate Chamber. That leaves the three closet doorways in the southern portion of the room—and Peale’s depiction of light and shadows provides the necessary clue. Light appears to pour obliquely into the space of the picture from the left. It glances off Titian’s face, fingers, and knee, as if these features projected through the picture plane, and it floods Raphaelle, so that his figure casts a dense shadow to the right. The logic of this orientation allows only one possibility: that the *Staircase Group* was installed within the empty



closet doorway in the western wall of the Senate Chamber. Here, natural light from the room's southern bank of windows would have seemed to illuminate the fictional stairwell. Peale even anticipated the way in which a shadow would fall (fig. 6) if daylight skimmed a narrow structure to the left of the image: the doorway's wooden frame, which may have doubled as the painting's own.

Art-historical tradition also holds that Peale added a wooden step to the bottom of the canvas to enhance the illusion of an actual staircase. This idea may have originated as early as 1854, when a catalogue published for an auction of the Peale's Museum collections asserted that "it was not unusual for persons to approach [the painting] and place one foot on the first step, which was a real one, and dogs have been known to run against it, in the attempt to ascend." Although the catalogue entry was composed at a half-century's remove from the Columbianum exhibition and rings full of colorful suggestions, several factors do support the idea that a length of wood, and possibly a full stair, formed part of the picture's original display. Notably, Peale took care to depict a curved lip when he painted the outer

tread of the painting's lowest step. This detail presupposes the installation of a piece of wood, consistent in color and grain with the painted stairs, placed directly beneath the canvas in imitation of a vertical riser. In addition, the painter Charles Leslie, who saw the *Staircase Group* at Peale's Museum in the years following the Columbianum exhibition, later recalled that "a real step projected on the floor of the room." At a certain distance, he wrote, "it was impossible to distinguish between the painted stairs and the wooden one; indeed, so complete was the deception, that on first seeing it my wonder was at the man's remaining stationary."¹⁴

Leslie's remarks beg the question of how spectators experienced the *Staircase Group* in the State House. Upon entering the room through one of the doors in the western wall, visitors initially took in the other art objects arrayed around the room. They encountered the painting, in other words, only after turning to face the wall through which they had entered. Was it immediately apparent that this was just another canvas? Or did the image momentarily startle some viewers? As art historian Dorinda Evans has noted, the perspectival composition of the stairs and the boys' figures appears most persuasive when seen from five to eight feet away.¹⁵ At any distance, Raphaelle and Titian Peale directly engage the observer's eye: halted in mid-step, as if distracted by the sudden arrival of a visitor, they stare intently outward from the stairwell. Their seeming acknowledgment of a person outside the canvas, in real space and time, effectively dissolves the materiality of the canvas, eliding the plane that demarcates fiction from actuality.

Further evidence suggests that Peale was not content to entice his audience with purely visual deceptions. The picture also pointed to a once extant, secret aspect of the architecture: a real garret stairway had been constructed behind the western wall some forty years before Peale installed his painting there. This narrow stairway

originated behind a door in the southwest corridor and led sharply northward, spiraling east at the top to open into an attic above the Senate Chamber. It may have been removed by 1795, and certainly was no longer in use: two decades earlier, it had been rendered obsolete by a wider stairway constructed between the lobby and attic.¹⁶ If the garret stairway was still present, however, then Peale's painting would have achieved a double deception by slyly alluding to a concealed feature of the very room in which it was shown. Though it replicated neither the architectural configuration nor the directional rise of the garret stairs, the *Staircase Group* successfully assumed that structure's place and purpose.

Painting Portrayed

As a trompe l'oeil object, the *Staircase Group* operated in a number of ways. Installed within the western wall of the State House Senate Chamber, the painting enacted a twofold ruse of substitution and simulation, at once representing and presenting an attic stairway. By locating the painting within a doorframe and adding a step to the base of the canvas, Charles Willson Peale sutured pictorial space to architectural form, bedeviling efforts to discern the boundaries of the real. He posed his sons upon the staircase in a manner sure to arrest the attention of an unsuspecting spectator. And across the surface of the painting, he submerged brush strokes and stylized gestures—telltale marks of artistic fabrication and identity—in seamlessly painted contours and expertly imitated textures. In fact, the only brush strokes visible are the greasy smears of pigment on Raphaëlle's palette—ostensibly Raphaëlle's marks, not his father's.

Of course, the ultimate proof of trompe l'oeil has traditionally rested upon the test of perception: did the *Staircase Group* fool anyone? Charles Leslie admitted that he was briefly taken in by the

painting when he saw it displayed at Peale's Museum, and Rembrandt Peale claimed that George Washington fell prey to the same illusion. No contemporary accounts of the Columbianum exhibition have surfaced to indicate whether anyone was similarly duped at the State House. But perhaps the question of whether the painting deceived viewers is somewhat misplaced, for it reduces pictorial illusion to an operation of sheer mimesis.¹⁷ It also distracts attention from aspects of the image that paradoxically undermine the presumed intent of visual trickery. As Leslie noted, for example, the jig is up as soon as the viewer realizes that the otherwise lifelike figures of Raphaëlle and Titian are frozen in place. Likewise, Peale's depiction of shadows was cued to a particular cast of daylight and would have seemed illogical once the sun shifted position. Even more importantly, Peale introduced the *Staircase Group* to the Columbianum's audience in a manner that forthrightly acknowledged they were looking at a work of art. His original title—*Whole Length—Portraits of Two of His Sons on a Staircase*—assigned the picture to the familiar genre of portraiture and invited spectators to reckon with it as such.

Peale's title also invites art-historical reckoning. How did the painting function as a portrait (and a double portrait at that)? And did its function as a portrait complement or otherwise affect its operations as a pictorial deception? The first issue is easy to resolve in one regard: the *Staircase Group* represented two of Peale's sons. The image portrays Raphaëlle Peale in the character of a painter. His instruments—a maulstick, palette, and brushes—swirl into view as he pauses in mid-climb and turns to gaze at the spectator. Within the context of the Columbianum exhibition, as Evans and other scholars have noted, the *Staircase Group* announced Raphaëlle's coming-of-age as a practicing artist, reaffirming his father's recommendation in April 1794 of "Raphael and Rembrandt as portrait painters." The twenty-one-year-old

- 7 *Theory* (left) and *Practice* (right), from George Richardson, *Iconology; or a Collection of Emblematical Figures, Moral and Instructive*, vol. 1, pl. XXIX (London, 1779). 3 ½ x 4 ½ in. each. Winterthur Library, Printed Book and Periodical Collection



displayed an impressive number of pictures at the exhibition (only immigrant British printmaker and enamelist William Birch surpassed Raphaelle in the number of works contributed). Portrayed as a diligent student on his way to or from the studio—his palette smudged with pigments, his brushes gleaming with oil—Raphaelle also embodied the objectives of the exhibition in which he was participating. Here, life-size and nearly in the flesh, was a representative of and for the nascent Columbianum academy. Perhaps Peale aimed to reward the exhibition-goers' patronage by reminding them, as one notice for the show had advised, that their financial support would help enable the "youth of our country [to] have an opportunity of studying and improving their talents in the fine arts, and thereby supersede the necessity and save the expense of a foreign education."¹⁸

Other aspects of the *Staircase Group* resist interpretation, however, especially Peale's depiction of Titian Ramsay, his third-born son. Aside from portraying the boy with an inquisitive expression, Peale communicated little information about him. Yet Titian's placement within the

composition prompts several observations. As Raphaelle ascends, he descends, one knee bent in indication of his movement. Whereas Raphaelle's limbs intersect with his instruments to create geometric patterns of angles and lines, Titian slinks into a Hogarthian S-curve, his head cocked to his left as if ducking beneath the door-frame.¹⁹ The two figures present a study in complementary contrasts. At the same time, they are intimately connected by the diagonal line of Raphaelle's maulstick, which flows upward into Titian's forearm as the boy gestures left in the direction of something offstage. What does this enigmatic gesture signify? Did Peale select these two sons from among a brood of seven children and counterpoise them upon the staircase for purely compositional reasons?

A fuller appreciation of the painting's dual function as portrait and *trompe l'oeil* may reside within another famous pair of figures. Juxtaposed upon the staircase, Titian and Raphaelle resemble Cesare Ripa's *Theory and Practice*, time-honored emblems of the liberal arts. Ripa published his emblem book, the *Iconologia*, in 1593; an illustrated version followed



Iconology among the texts in his extensive library.²⁰

Richardson's book included lengthy descriptions and lavish engravings of Ripa's emblems, including Theory and Practice (fig. 7). Theory, the author explained, "is the study of any art or science, and is represented by the figure of a young woman, dressed in azure coloured drapery, in an attitude of contemplation, descending a staircase, with a pair of compasses on her head, having the points upwards." The compasses signified Theory's dedication to the demonstration of truth. Her descent of the staircase connoted "progressive movement," and her youth showed that "agility, ardor, hope and cheerfulness" were "suitable endowments to the study of Theory." Theory's counterpart, Practice, was "the actual performance or exercise of any profession." She was pictured as a mature woman resting her left foot upon a dais and leaning forward from the waist, intent upon two instruments, a compass and a pullet. Whereas Theory's head and hands were oriented upward, those of Practice turned downward, signifying her concentration "on earthly things."²¹

Visual and conceptual parallels between Richardson's engravings and the *Staircase Group* suggest that Ripa's emblematic vocabulary informed Peale's creation of the painting. Raphaelle, as already noted, configures the generalized ideal of a practicing artist. Certain details further correlate with the emblem of Practice. Raphaelle is the elder brother, just as Practice is Theory's senior. His bodily position emulates Practice: both incline their torsos forward and place their left foot on an upper level. And Raphaelle carries the tools of his trade. Titian, in turn, revives Theory's "progressive movement" down the staircase. Youthful and curious, his bright features metaphorically suggest Theory's "contemplative" qualities, and his oddly pointed gesture recalls the purposeful pose of Theory's hands. Peale's careful highlighting of Titian's head and hand, the apparent effect of a

8 *Painting*, from George Richardson, *Iconology; or a Collection of Emblematical Figures, Moral and Instructive*, vol. 1, pl. XXXVI (London, 1779). 3 ½ x 4 ½ in. Winterthur Library, Printed Book and Periodical Collection

ten years later. The book quickly became a treasured handbook for allegorical representation and was reprinted in numerous languages during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In 1779, fifteen years before the establishment of the Columbianum academy, George Richardson published a two-volume folio edition of Ripa in London entitled *Iconology; or a Collection of Emblematical Figures, Moral and Instructive*. Peale had at least one copy near at hand: the British artist James Coxe, who established a drawing school in Philadelphia in 1790 and directed interested parties to call for him "at Mr. Peale's Museum," counted Richardson's

sunbeam that also bathes Raphaelle's palette, may also allude to Ripa's emblem of Painting. As described and depicted by Richardson, three rays of light illuminating Painting's head, hand, and palette signify her aptitude for "invention, design, and colors" (fig. 8).

Peale may have encouraged these associations for several reasons. Ripa's emblems presented an imaginative system for portraying Raphaelle and Titian. Raphaelle's depiction as Practice had clear biographical resonance, but Titian's equation with Theory was equally appropriate, for the boy had a keen appetite for learning. He took particular interest in natural history, his father's favorite scientific field, and helped Peale collect birds for the museum during an excursion to Delaware's Cape Henlopen in 1793. "I have found Titian to be a considerable help-mate," Charles Willson Peale confided in his journal. "He is a diligent good boy." Peale could honor his son's enthusiasm for intellectual pursuits, and display his own hopes for the boy, by representing him in the form of Theory. Rembrandt Peale paid a related tribute to his brother when Titian succumbed to a brutal epidemic of yellow fever in 1798: "His early loss let Science mourn, responsive with our frequent sighs."²²

By cloaking his boys in the attitudes of familiar emblems, Peale also added a semantic enigma to the painting's visual deceptions. Richardson encouraged this sort of representational gambit in the *Iconology*. Because viewers delight in recognizing camouflaged emblematic imagery, he said, a painter should "present to the understanding and judgment of the spectator, something more than is offered to the external eye; and in this attempt he will succeed perfectly, if he knows the right use of allegory, and is dexterous enough, to employ it as a transparent veil, which rather covers than conceals his thoughts."²³ This advice sanctioned a practice already common in eighteenth-century portraiture. The Swiss artist Angelica Kauffman, after

whom Peale named a daughter, cast herself in the role of Design "listening to the inspiration of Poetry" in a 1782 painting. And Reynolds, who occasionally portrayed female sitters as muses and deities, advocated the conflation of modern dress and allegorical figuration as a desirable masquerade that added "variety" to portraits. There is evidence that Peale took heed of such precedents and advice at least once before painting the *Staircase Group*. Art historians Ellen Miles and Leslie Reinhardt have persuasively argued that in 1788 he represented the newlyweds Benjamin and Eleanor Ridgely Laming in the guise of Rinaldo and Armida, the fictional lovers of Torquato Tasso's epic poem, *Gerusalemme Liberata* (1581).²⁴

Much as the Lamings don, to parse Richardson, the "transparent veil" of literary characters, so Titian and Raphaelle Peale are "covered" in the sheer disguise of Theory and Practice. Their masquerade entailed more than one costume: Peale also inverted the traditional gender of these emblems. He was not the first to do so. Ten years before Ripa published the *Iconologia*, the German printmaker Hendrick Goltzius represented Practice as a bearded man receiving instruction from Art, a winged female. Within his own recent memory, Peale might have recalled the carnivalesque twists of gender that occurred during a civic pageant he had helped organize: the Grand Federal Procession of July 1788, an elaborate parade staged to mark Pennsylvania's ratification of the federal Constitution. The event featured artisans enacting the roles of Ripa's emblems. Jonathan Gostelow, representing Philadelphia's cabinet makers, for example, carried a scale and dividers, the instruments of Architecture, while another man, costumed as Mercury in a white dress with "real wings attached to his head and feet and a garland of flowers around his temples," celebrated the printers and binders. The most spectacular performances entailed figurations of Liberty, one of the omnipresent female emblems of the

revolutionary era: John Nixon, signifying Independence, headed the parade on horseback bearing Liberty's staff and cap.²⁵

Whether Peale expected the Columbianum's audience to understand a coded allusion to Theory and Practice is a matter of speculation, for none of the extant academy documents offer details concerning attendance at the exhibition. Artists, several of whom displayed objects with titles indicating allegorical content, certainly comprised part of the crowd. It is also reasonable to assume that the event attracted men and women of middling and privileged socioeconomic backgrounds similar to those of subscribers to Peale's Museum in the mid-1790s: statesmen, merchants, lawyers, physicians, and clergymen. Peale encouraged relatives as far away as New York to visit the exhibition and, as keeper of the collections at the American Philosophical Society, surely appealed to Philadelphia's scientific and intellectual communities.²⁶ Congressional delegates and members of the foreign diplomatic community may also have been in attendance, since Philadelphia was the interim federal capital during the 1790s.

These viewers, like many early national Americans, were probably experienced in the identification of emblems. Emblems decorated surfaces ranging from broadsides to ceramics and formed, as Roger Stein and other scholars have established, a "substantial part of Peale's and his generation's way of seeing and knowing, their cognitive equipment, and their way of visually and verbally shaping their understanding of their universe." Peale occasionally added texts to clarify the meaning of his emblematic imagery: in 1781, when he displayed illuminated transparencies in Philadelphia windows to celebrate George Washington's wartime tour of the city, he identified certain aspects of the imagery, including emblems of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture, in terms resembling Richardson's text.²⁷

No such explanation accompanied the display of the *Staircase Group*, however,

and the absence is telling. It suggests that Peale expected visitors to the Columbianum exhibit to apply their "understanding and judgment," as Richardson put it, to see beyond the "transparent veil" of allegory. As the art historian Ronald Paulson has noted, the "veil of allegory" was a literary conceit that described the means by which "the poet traditionally protected the truth he was conveying from being debased by contact with the multitude." Whereas "an ordinary reader," as a writer for the *Spectator* explained, could understand the "plain, literal sense" of a representation, "men of greater penetration" should be able to discern "hidden meaning." In eighteenth-century Britain, this aesthetic paradigm tied visual perception and cognition to emerging hierarchies of taste and class. In post-revolutionary America, the effort to see beyond the obvious had a further implication: political agency was defined in part by one's ability to "contemplate and discriminate objects, extensive and complicated in their nature," as James Madison expressed in the *Federalist papers*. Trompe l'oeil pictures, which challenged spectators to discern fact from illusion, convened thresholds for the performance of political subjectivity: detection and exposure of false appearances demonstrated one's mettle as a fit citizen of the republic.²⁸ The *Staircase Group*, installed within the seat of representative government, went a step further by inviting the Columbianum's audience to see "something more" than the portrait of two boys upon a staircase that was "offered to the external eye."

Precisely what "hidden meanings" spectators were expected to understand brings us to another of Peale's potential motivations for invoking Theory and Practice. On January 3, 1795, he chaired a meeting at which the academy's founders presented a draft of their constitution. It stated that the "Columbian College" was formed "for the encouragement of belles lettres, natural history, physionomical anatomy and zoolomy [*sic*], operative chymistry [*sic*],

architecture, sculpture, historical painting, landscape painting, perspective, engraving, and such other branches of sciences as may be connected with the theory and practice of painting, sculpture, architecture, etcetera.” The conceptual dyad of “theory and practice” helped structure the mission and organization of the Columbianum academy. As a leader of the Columbianum, Peale knew this language and may even have authored it.²⁹

The phrase “theory and practice” formed a regular part of eighteenth-century titles on all aspects of education, including painting and perspective manuals, and connoted a doctrine of classical humanism. Renaissance art theorists, eager

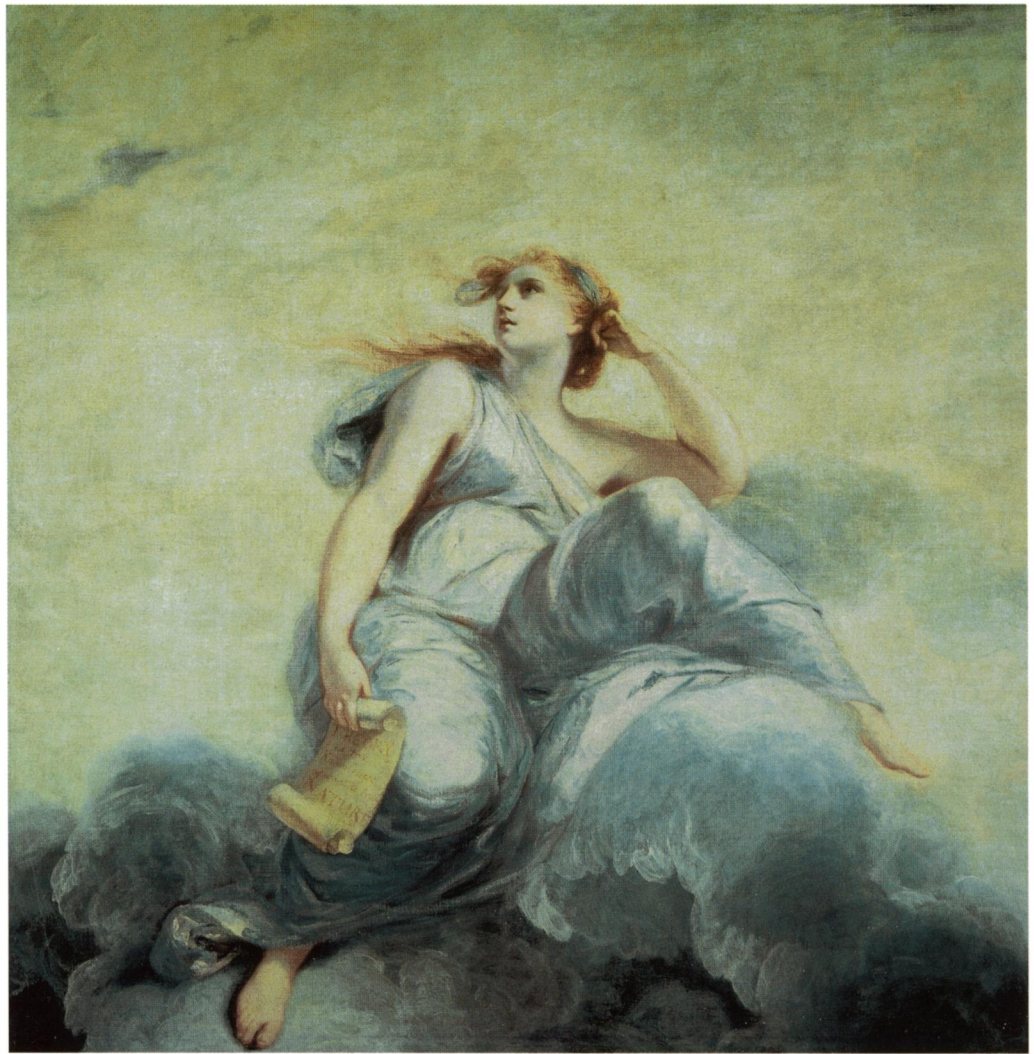
to prove painting’s merit as a liberal art, had urged artists to complement their training with a thorough education in letters. This balance of theory, the comprehension of learned texts, and practice, the perfection of mechanical skills, comprised the pedagogical backbone of the modern art academy. So pervasive was this ideology that the French painter Gérard de Lairesse, who in 1707 wrote a treatise entitled *The Art of Painting* (a translation of which Peale owned), featured Theory and Practice assisting a blindfolded artist in the foreground of his emblem-rich frontispiece (fig. 9). Likewise, when Reynolds was commissioned to paint the ceiling of Somerset House, the home of the Royal Academy, he represented Theory elevated on a bank of clouds (fig. 10). The image, which reached a wider audience as a mezzotint in 1785, depicted a young woman bearing a scroll inscribed, “Theory is the Knowledge of what is truly Nature.” This declaration, as scholar Martin Postle has observed, “served not only to identify the allegorical figure represented but ultimately to draw attention to the intellectual basis of Reynolds’s own art.”³⁰ It expressed the maxim of artistic imitation that Reynolds rehearsed throughout his *Discourses*: study the lessons embedded in the painting of ancient and modern masters while practicing selective imitation of nature.

Just as Reynolds’s *Theory* demonstrated the “intellectual basis” of his art, the *Staircase Group* established Peale’s familiarity with the learned notion of a “veil of allegory” and the educational principle of “theory and practice.” And much as *Theory* articulated the pedagogical foundation of the Royal Academy, the *Staircase Group* celebrated the establishment of the Columbianum by visualizing its objectives. United upon Theory’s staircase, Titian and Raphaelle Peale personified the academy’s mission to train aspiring students in the “theory and practice of painting, sculpture, [and] architecture.” This image implicitly posited an importance for the

- 9 Gérard de Lairesse, frontispiece from *The Art of Painting*, trans. John Frederick Fritsch (London, 1738). 5 ½ x 6 ½ in. Library Company of Philadelphia



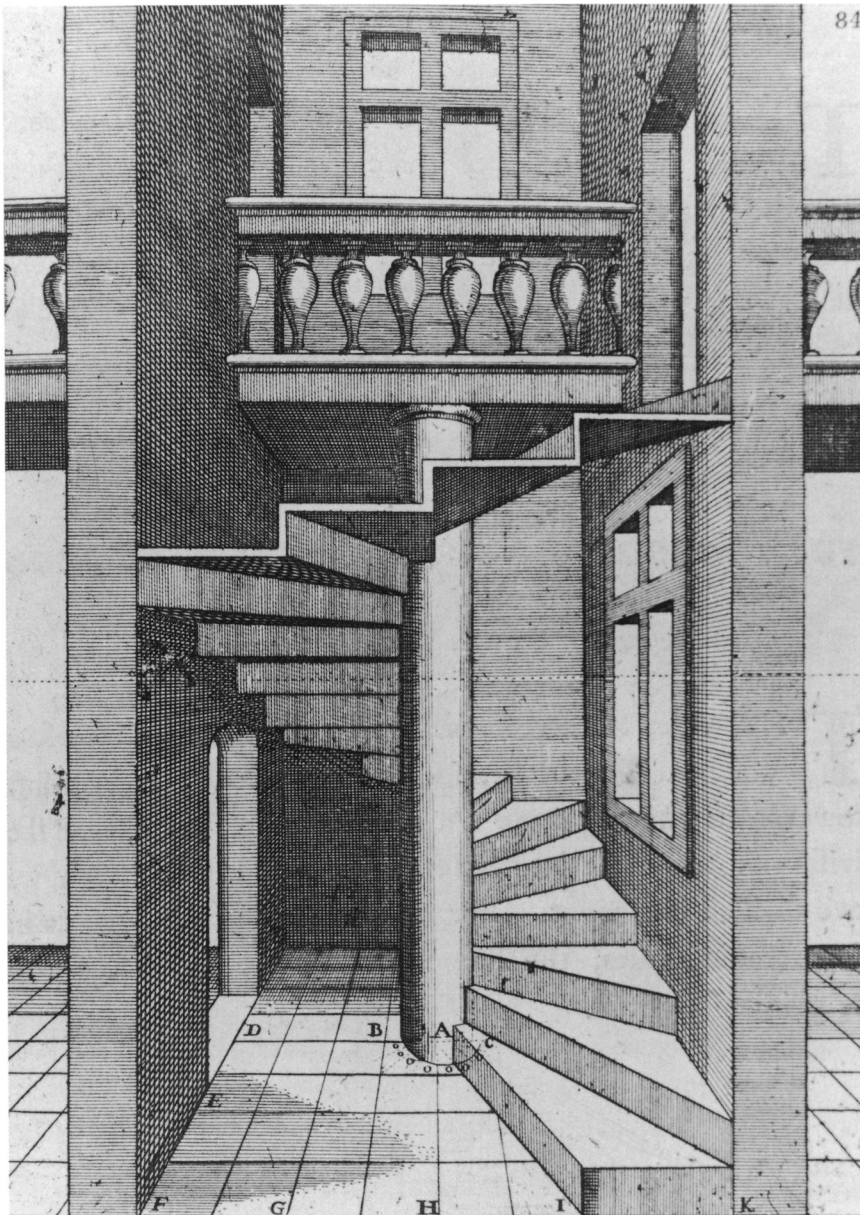
10 Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Theory*, ca. 1779. Oil, 68 x 68 in. Royal Academy of Arts, London



school that Peale and his colleagues had been unwilling to state verbally. Their vision of the academy, formulated in opposition to Groombridge's attacks, had projected an inherently political institution, one intended to help repudiate monarchy and affirm the democratic principles of local representation. By invoking the loftiest emblems of painting, however, the *Staircase Group* claimed a universal purpose for the Columbianum that lifted it above the particular concerns of Pennsylvania artists. Ironically, given the nature of the Columbianum's internecine squabbles, the picture set the ambitions of the Philadelphia academy squarely on par with its British counterpart.

Self-Portrait of the Artist as Deceiver

At once likeness and deception, portrait and *trompe l'oeil*, the *Staircase Group* combined two seemingly incompatible systems of representation. If the testimony of spectators can be believed, *trompe l'oeil's* effects were instantaneous, prompting surprise, delight, and, on rare occasion, genuine perceptual confusion. Emblematic imagery, by contrast, invited circumspect "reading" by viewers literate in languages of signs. But in the eighteenth century, there was a ready way out of this impasse: Cartesian philosophy held that a viewer could simultaneously be deceived and fully cognizant of a

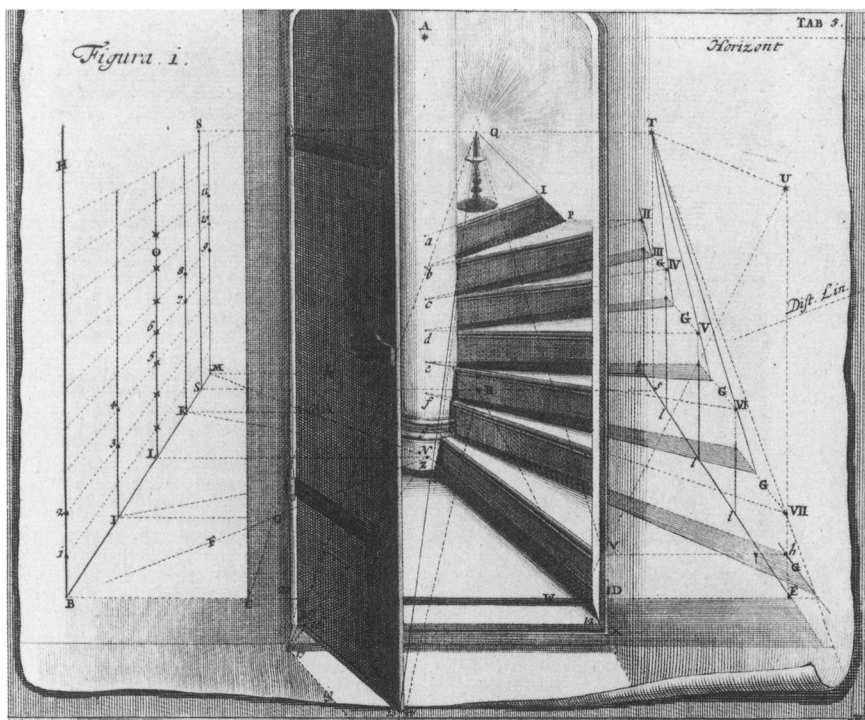


- 11 "Winding or Spiral Stairs in Perspective," from Jean Dubreuil, *Bowles's Practice of Perspective; or an Easy Method of Representing Natural Objects According to the Rules of Art* (London, 1782), p. 83. 7 1/4 x 5 1/4 in. Winterthur Library, Printed Book and Periodical Collection

deception. Within this bimodal state of illusion, the mind retained mastery over the easily deluded senses. Edmund Burke, whose *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* was widely collected in colonial and early national America, concurred with the Abbé Jean Baptiste Dubos and other Enlightenment thinkers in arguing that subject matter generated representational illusions, whether pictorial or theatrical. In the tenacious hold of a moral and

edifying subject, the beholder underwent a catharsis of sympathy for his fellow man, yielding to the representation's pretense of fiction for the sake of a collective social order. French art theorist Roger de Piles, whose musings on the appeal of illusionistic portraiture were reprinted verbatim in the second edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1778–83), proposed a different idea: that the painted surface of a picture—not subject matter—instigated dialectical experiences of deception and awareness. Aesthetic attraction and perceptual illusion were felt in simultaneity, he argued; caught within an endlessly circular movement in which image and object successively vied for one's attention, the spectator yielded to the semblance of reality while examining the visual arrangement of color and chiaroscuro that "called" out and made him halt before the canvas.³¹

Despite their differences, both theories allowed for the possibility that a viewer could willfully sustain a state of perceptual deception while observing the meanings or materiality of illusion. Such considerations inevitably would have roused curiosity about the painter responsible for the depiction. In the case of *Staircase Group*, Peale encouraged viewers to reflect upon his abilities and achievements. Although his decision to paint a winding staircase may have been informed by the nearby location of a hidden stairway, he was no doubt also aware that staircases were generally acknowledged to be exceedingly difficult subjects to represent. Authors of perspective treatises stressed their geometrical complexities and located instructional drawings of staircases near the end of their texts to indicate the advanced nature of the topic.³² If Peale meant to imply that he had mastered the necessary perspectival skills, however, he struck a disingenuous stance. Formal similarities between the *Staircase Group* and perspective plates suggest that he may have derived his composition from one of several available print sources (fig. 11).



12 “How to render a circular staircase, artificially lit from above, with the light pouring out of the door,” from Johann Jacob Schubler, *Perspectiva. Pes-picturae. Das ist: Kurtze und leichte Verfassung der practicabelsten Regul, zur perspectivischen Zeichnungs-Kunst*, pl. 118 (Nuremburg, 1719–20). 7 x 9 in.

In addition to being regarded as technically challenging imagery, staircases were explicitly associated with visual deception. Jean Dubreuil observed in his widely reprinted text, *The Practice of Perspective* (later called *Bowles’s Practice of Perspective*), that “nothing gives a perspective so much grace, or deceives the eye so easily” as the effects of chiaroscuro introduced by the alternating projection and recession of a stairway’s treads and risers. Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europeans took this lesson to heart: trompe l’oeil staircases, together with other architectural illusions, decorated the walls of manor houses and ornamented the pages of art treatises (fig. 12). Paolo and Benedetto Veronese’s murals for the Villa Barbaro, occasionally cited as possible sources for the *Staircase Group*, depicted individuals passing through or peeking around doors, and figures climbing staircases could be spotted upon the walls of several continental and British castles. Inspired by such imagery—or possibly Peale’s *Staircase Group*—a Connecticut church commissioned a

trompe l’oeil staircase for one of its walls in 1817.³³

The iconography of the staircase, coupled with Peale’s imperceptible brushwork and clever installation of the painting in the State House, set the artist within a centuries-old tradition of pictorial deception. This was a rather compromised position to occupy in 1795. Although trompe l’oeil easel painting had become something of a phenomenon during the 1700s, with simulated bas-reliefs and hunting trophies crowding the Paris salons and London exhibitions, French critics and British academicians were engaged in a spirited indictment of deception by the close of the eighteenth century. Reynolds launched a formidable attack upon trompe l’oeil in his *Idler* essays and *Discourses*, arguing that pictorial deception stalled artistic progress. Trompe l’oeil delighted the senses instead of the mind, hindering art’s mission of encouraging “public benefits,” and persuaded unlearned spectators that mimetic precision was the apex of artistic achievement. “Leave the meaner artist servilely to suppose that those are the best paintings, which are most likely to deceive the spectator,” Reynolds advised in 1771.³⁴

Reynolds’s castigation of trompe l’oeil decisively shaped British opinion on the subject, but his influence on American aesthetics and art practices is hard to measure in this instance. Colonial and federal-era Americans seldom remarked upon trompe l’oeil art in writing, and Peale’s thoughts about pictorial deception varied over time. He wrote nothing about the *Staircase Group* in 1795 and referred to it only briefly three decades later (it was long “admired for the deception produced,” Peale proudly noted in his autobiography of 1825–26). In 1808, he noted in a letter to his daughter Angelica, he “contemplated painting for the museum some pieces of deception of still life,” but rejected the idea because such works were “of less value than portraits of living characters”—the collection of revolutionary

heroes and republican “worthies” displayed in the museum. In later years, however, Peale unequivocally endorsed the creation of lifelike portraits, telling son-in-law Coleman Sellers that a “perfect illusion” was invaluable and asking Rembrandt, “Why should we not finish our pictures so highly and make them so like, that it would be difficult to find any difference between the picture and the original?” Peale elaborated upon these ideas in his autobiography: “If a painter . . . paints a portrait in such perfection as to produce a perfect illusion of sight, in such perfection that the spectator believes the real person is there, that happy painter will deserve to be caressed by the greatest of mortal beings. . . . The artist who makes such an illusive likeness, would be loved, would be admired, and would be honored by the children and children’s children, nay, by all who might see such of perfection of art for ages to come.” In 1823 he set out to prove these convictions by painting a magisterial self-portrait that combined aspects of *The Artist in His Museum* (1822) with the *Staircase Group*. Collapsing his two sons into a single figure, Peale appropriated Raphaelle’s instruments and assumed Titian’s descent of the staircase. Although the *Staircase Self-Portrait* is believed to have perished in a mid-nineteenth-century fire, Peale extensively documented his work on the picture. “I mean to make the whole piece a deception if I can,” he confided to another son, Rubens Peale (1784–1865), who had commissioned the picture for the family’s Baltimore Museum.³⁵

Peale’s remarks on illusionism suggest the influence of a non-academic discourse of art writing that, although contemporary with the writings of Reynolds, advanced a different notion: that trompe l’oeil was a desirable goal—indeed, the primary goal—of painting. Early in his career Peale read several books that promoted this idea, including Charles du Fresnoy’s *Art of Painting* (1661, English translation 1695), which urged the painter

to “conceal the pains and study which his art and work have cost him under a pleasing sort of deceit.” In 1771 Edmund Jennings, one of Peale’s early patrons, sent the artist an edition of Matthew Pilkington’s *Gentleman’s and Connoisseur’s Dictionary of Painters* (1770); several years later, the painter and theater critic William Dunlap gave Peale a pocket-size English translation of Antonio Palomino de Castro y Velasco’s *Account of the Lives and Works of the Most Eminent Spanish Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* (1739). These books were replete with accounts of dazzling illusions. Pilkington and Palomino showered honors upon artists who deceived spectators with portraits that seemed to breathe and fruit that appeared edible. Peale scribbled annotations throughout Pilkington’s *Dictionary*, penciling a private admission next to a passage about the seventeenth-century Dutch painter Gerrit Dou, who was derided by eighteenth-century writers for his “lowly,” detailed style and trompe l’oeil compositions: “The criticks are often severe on a laboured picture, but . . . nature is very perfect, and a judicious painter cannot finish too high.” Peale devoted equal attention to Palomino’s text, correcting misspellings in the translation and ornamenting pages with his signature. Palomino gave high praise to deceptive images, including a tabletop cluttered with drawings that he swore he “took to be the real things themselves” and a portrait by Velázquez which, when placed beside the sitter, left viewers “with amazement and even a sort of terror, without knowing which they were to speak to, or which was to answer them.” Art historian Phoebe Lloyd, who first noted Peale’s acquisition of this book, has suggested that Palomino licensed Peale to practice artistic deception. Perhaps Peale took special notice of Palomino’s praise for Antonio del Castilla y Saavedra: a painter who created “that celebrated stair-case, consisting of figures bigger than the life; the whole executed with singular mastery and bravery.”³⁶ Peale’s own staircase, consisting of life-size

figures masterfully executed, likewise earned the artist retrospective fame.

Reconstructing the installation of the *Staircase Group* in the Pennsylvania State House reveals the manifold ways in which Peale conceived this painting in direct relation to the establishment of the Columbianum academy. Not only did Peale create the picture for the school's inaugural exhibition, as art historians have long suspected; he also planned it for a specific site within the Senate Chamber, appending features of the existing architecture to fuse the *Staircase Group* with its surroundings. This armature of pictorial deception supported a camouflaged allegorical program. Arrayed in the familiar forms of Ripa's Theory and Practice, inveterate emblems of artistic method and academic pedagogy, Titian and Raphaelle

Peale embodied the founding principles of the Columbianum academy.

Though Peale was visually absent from the picture, the *Staircase Group* was vested with his presence. Grand in scale, concept, and execution, the painting signaled Peale's triumph over his rivals in the Columbianum. It also decisively affirmed the location of the "original and real Columbianum": on the bottom step of the *Staircase Group*, Peale pictured a subscription ticket to his museum (fig. 13). Once "imprinted" with the museum's name—and thus doubling as Peale's signature in the precise area of the canvas where the observer ordinarily seeks out signs of authorship—the card is now faded beyond recognition.³⁷ But in 1795 it interjected a final play of illusion and allusion. Curling upward at one corner so that it casts a shadow upon the step beneath, the ticket beckons the spectator's grasp and close inspection. At the same time, it draws the eye to the base of the long diagonal that begins at Raphaelle's shoe, leads up his leg and maulstick, and concludes at Titian's gesture in the opposite corner. There, poised upon the western wall of the Senate Chamber, Titian appeared to point south across the room, up and outward through the windows that illuminated his features, to the building that still stands just southeast of the State House: Philosophical Hall, which housed Peale's Museum and the Columbianum academy. The *Staircase Group* pointed back at its creator.

13 Charles Willson Peale, *Staircase Group* (detail from lower right corner)



Notes

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1 For Rembrandt Peale's account of the *Staircase Group*, see "Reminiscences, by Rembrandt Peale, The Person and Mien of Washington," *Crayon* 3, part 3 (April 1856): 100. On the latter point, see Otto

Friedrich, "The Peales: America's First Family of Art," *National Geographic* (December 1990): 98–121; and Michael O. Tunnell and Kathy Osborn, *The Joke on George* (New York: Tambourine Books, 1993). For critical analyses of the Washington myth, see Phoebe Lloyd, "A Death in the Family," *Philadelphia Museum of Art Bulletin* 78:335 (spring 1982): 2–13; and David C. Ward and Sidney Hart, "Subversion and Illusion in the Life and

- Art of Raphaelle Peale," *American Art* 8 no. 3–4 (summer/fall 1994): 3–27.
- 2 *The Exhibition of the Columbianum, or American Academy of Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, &c. Established at Philadelphia, 1795* (Philadelphia: Printed by Francis & Robert Bailey, 1795). On the figures in the *Staircase Group*, see Charles Coleman Sellers, *Charles Willson Peale* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969), p. 272 for the quote; Oliver Larkin, *Art and Life in America* (New York: Rinehart & Co., 1949); and Lillian B. Miller, "The Peales and Their Legacy, 1735–1885," in *The Peale Family: Creation of a Legacy, 1770–1870* (Abbeville Press in association with the Trust for Museum Exhibitions and National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, 1996), p. 51.
 - 3 "Charles W. Peale respectfully informs the Public . . .," *Dunlap and Claypoole's American Daily Newspaper* (24 April 1794), reprinted in Miller, Sidney Hart, Toby A. Appel, and David C. Ward, eds., *The Selected Papers of Charles Willson Peale and His Family* 5 vols. (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1983–2000), 2:91. Misspellings and arbitrary capitalizations by Peale and other writers have been corrected throughout this essay.
 - 4 Sources, excerpts, and summaries of the Columbianum's founding documents are reprinted in *Selected Papers* 2:101–13. See pp. 108–9 for brief biographies of the founders. See also "The following pages are a history of the Columbianum or American Academy," typescript, n.p., n.d., Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts Archives (PAFA); "An association of Artists in America for the protection and encouragement of the Fine Arts," Philadelphia, 29 December 1794; and *The Constitution of the Columbianum, or American Academy of the Fine Arts, Adopted February 17, 1795* (Philadelphia: Printed by Robert & Francis Bailey, 1795), p. 7.
 - 5 For an early account of the Columbianum's history, see James Flexner, "The Scope of Painting in the 1790's," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* (1950): 74–89. On the Columbianum's life classes, see *The Constitution of the Columbianum*, p. 8; William Dunlap, *History of the Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States* (New York, 1834), p. 418; Rembrandt Peale, "Reminiscences. Exhibitions and Academies," *Crayon* 1, no. 19 (9 May 1855), p. 290; Titian Ramsay Peale II, Columbianum Papers, documents 3 and 4, Historical Society of Pennsylvania; Earl Shinn, "The First Art Academy," *Lippincott's Magazine* 9 (February 1872): 145; and "The following pages are a history of the Columbianum," PAFA. On debates concerning the virtues and vices of art, see Neil Harris, *The Artist in American Society: The Formative Years, 1790–1860* (New York: George Braziller, 1966).
 - 6 Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses on Art*, ed. Robert R. Wark (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1988), pp. 13, 15. Blodgett is quoted in *Selected Papers* 2:108. Groombridge's views are expressed in "Columbianum, Or, National College . . .," *Aurora General Advertiser* (hereafter *Aurora*) 1318 (28 February 1795), n.p. For Field, see Sellers, *Charles Willson Peale: Later Life (1790–1827)* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1947), p. 67.
 - 7 "To the public," *Philadelphia Gazette* 1970 (14 February 1795), n.p.; and "To the Editor of the Aurora," *Aurora* 1323 (6 March 1795), n.p.
 - 8 "At a meeting of the Columbianum . . .," *Philadelphia Gazette* 1970 (14 February 1795), n.p.; and "A correspondent is amused . . .," *Aurora* 1324 (7 March 1795), n.p. Nineteenth-century historians blamed various agents for the Columbianum's split. See, for instance, Dunlap, *History of the Rise and Progress*; C. Edwards Lester, *The Artists of America* (New York: Baker and Scribner, 1846), p. 204; and Rembrandt Peale, "Reminiscences. Exhibitions and Academies."
 - 9 "To Correspondents," *Aurora* 1327 (11 March 1795), n.p.; and "The committee of correspondence . . .," *Aurora* 1351 (8 April 1795), n.p. Additional correspondence concerning the Columbianum appeared in the *Aurora* on 23 and 24 February; 4, 9, 10, and 25 March; 8 April; and 1 May. See also *Philadelphia Gazette*, 12, 13, 18, and 21 February 1795.
 - 10 *The Exhibition of the Columbianum*. The catalogue listed 133 entries, but several of these included multiple objects. On the suspension of academy classes, see "Exhibition," *Aurora* 1371 (1 May 1795), n.p.
 - 11 In addition to one *Deception*, Raphaelle Peale contributed another four works with titles suggestive of *trompe l'oeil* depiction; William Gerdtz, "A *Deception* Unmasked; An Artist Uncovered," *American Art Journal* 18, no. 2 (1986): 8. On British *trompe l'oeil* art and the earliest American usage of the phrase "trompe l'oeil," see Wendy Bellion, "Likeness and Deception in Early American Art" (Ph.D. dissertation, Northwestern Univ., 2001), pp. 152–58.
 - 12 On the State House, see Frank M. Etting, *An Historical Account of the Old State House of Pennsylvania, Now Known as the Hall of Independence* (Boston: James R. Osgood & Co., 1876); J. Thomas Scharf and Thompson Westcott, *History of Philadelphia, 1609–1884*, 3 vols. (Philadelphia: L. H. Everts & Co., 1884); and Edward M. Riley, "The Independence Hall Group," in *Historic Philadelphia: From the Founding until the Early Nineteenth Century*, *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 43, no. 1 (1953): 7–42. On the architectural configuration and embellishment of the Senate Chamber, see Penelope Hartshorne Batcheler, *Independence Hall Historic Structures Report. Architectural Data Section. Part II Portion. The Physical History of the Second Floor* (Philadelphia: Independence National Historical Park, 1992), especially pp. 32–36, 181, 207–9, 216–17.
 - 13 On the location and function of the doorways, see Batcheler, *Independence Hall*, pp. 207–9 and 216–17.
 - 14 *Catalogue of Peale's Museum, National Portrait Gallery* ([Philadelphia], 1854), p. 6; and C. R. Leslie, *A Hand-Book for Young Painters* (London: John Murray, Albemarle Street, 1855), p. 3. Leslie, initially transfixed by the *Staircase Group*, later revised his opinion, stating that "deception to the degree in which it was [practiced] here" marked the work of "very ordinary" painters.
 - 15 Dorinda Evans, "Staircase Group," in *Philadelphia, Three Centuries of American Art* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1976), p. 167.
 - 16 See Batcheler, *Independence Hall*, pp. 35–36; Appendix F, pp. 218–22; and Appendix G, pp. 223–31. Batcheler notes that the partition enclosing the garret stairway remained in place through at least 1827. In a telephone conversation of 10 December 2002 she clarified that there is insufficient evidence to determine whether the stairway was still standing in 1795.
 - 17 Marian Hobson makes a similar point in regard to the literal manner in which Pliny the Elder's famous narrative of

- Zeuxis and Parrhasios is frequently interpreted; see *The Object of Art: The Theory of Illusion in Eighteenth Century France* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1982), p. 18.
- 18 “The Exhibition of the American Academy of Painting, Sculpture, &c. is now opened,” *Aurora* 1397 (1 June 1795). See Evans, “Staircase Group”; and “Charles Willson Peale,” in Theodore Stebbins et al., *A New World: Masterpieces of American Painting 1760–1910* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1983), p. 204.
- 19 On Peale’s interest in Hogarth’s aesthetics, see John S. Hallam, “Charles Willson Peale and Hogarth’s Line of Beauty,” *Antiques* 122, no. 5 (November 1982): 1074–78.
- 20 Coxe’s copy of Richardson’s *Iconology* entered the collection of the Library Company of Philadelphia upon his death. On Coxe’s drawing school, see Alfred Coxe Prime, *The Arts & Crafts in Philadelphia, Maryland, and South Carolina 1786–1800, Series Two, Gleanings from Newspapers*, 2 vols. (Topsfield, Mass.: Walpole Society, 1932) 2:45. Miller also speculated that Peale was familiar with Ripa’s *Iconologia* in Miller, E. P. Richardson, and Brook Hindle, *Charles Willson Peale and His World* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1983), p. 176.
- 21 George Richardson, *Iconology; or a Collection of Emblematical Figures, Moral and Instructive*, 2 vols. (London, 1779), 2:60–61.
- 22 Charles Willson Peale, diary 13, 29 August 1793, in *Selected Papers* 2:55; and Rembrandt Peale, “Ode on the death of Titian Peale,” in *ibid.*, 2:231.
- 23 Richardson, *Iconology*, n.p.
- 24 Reynolds, *Discourses*, pp. 128–9; and Ellen Miles and Leslie Reinhardt, “Art conceal’d: Peale’s Double Portrait of Benjamin and Eleanor Ridgely Laming,” *Art Bulletin* 78, no. 1 (March 1996): 56–74. For a reproduction of Kauffman’s painting, see Gill Perry and Michael Rossington, eds., *Femininity and Masculinity in Eighteenth-Century Art and Culture* (Manchester and New York: Manchester Univ. Press, 1994), frontispiece.
- 25 See Francis Hopkinson, *The Miscellaneous Essays and Occasional Writings of Francis Hopkinson*, 3 vols. (Philadelphia: Printed by T. Dobson, 1792), especially 2:355–85. For a reproduction of Goltzius’s engraving *Ars Pictoria*, see Walter L. Strauss, ed., *Hendrik Goltzius 1558–1617: The Complete Engravings and Woodcuts* (New York: Abaris Books, 1977), p. 255.
- 26 On subscribers to Peale’s Museum, see David Brigham, *Public Culture in the Early Republic: Peale’s Museum and Its Audience* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995). On May 6, apparently in response to an unlocated letter from Peale, his brother-in-law John DePeyster wrote from New York, “I will by all means endeavor to be in time to see the exhibition.” No record of his visit has survived. See *Selected Papers* 2:113.
- 27 Roger Stein, “Charles Willson Peale’s Expressive Design: The Artist in His Museum,” *Prospects: An Annual of American Cultural Studies* 6 (1981): 152. On Peale’s transparency depicting Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture, see *Selected Papers* 1:365–66, and Richardson, *Iconology*, pp. 73–75.
- 28 On the “veil of allegory,” see Ronald Paulson, *Emblem and Expression: Meaning in English Art of the Eighteenth Century* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1975), p. 53. For Madison, see *Federalist* no. 37, “The Dilemmas of the Constitutional Convention,” reprinted in *The Federalist Papers*, selected and introduced by Andrew Hacker (New York: Washington Square Press, 1976), pp. 85–86.
- 29 “Minutes, The Constitution of the Columbian College,” *Selected Papers* 2:106.
- 30 For Lairesse, see *The Art of Painting*, trans. John Frederick Fritsch (London, 1738). Edward Nygren notes that Peale owned a copy of Lairesse in “Art Instruction in Philadelphia, 1795–1845” (M.A. thesis, Univ. of Delaware, 1969), p. 179. On Reynolds’s painting of Theory, see Martin Postle, *Sir Joshua Reynolds: The Subject Pictures* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995), p. 185; Postle’s discussion of the picture in David Mannings, *Sir Joshua Reynolds: A Complete Catalogue of His Paintings* (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 2000), p. 567; and Nicholas Penny, ed., *Reynolds* (London: Royal Academy of Arts in association with Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1986), p. 284.
- 31 On copies of Burke’s *Philosophical Enquiry* in American libraries, see Janice G. Schimmelman, “A Checklist of European Treatises on Art and Essays on Aesthetics Available in America through 1815,” *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 93, part 1 (April 1983): 112–20. For de Piles, see *The Principles of Painting* (London: Printed for J. Osborn, 1743); Thomas Puttfarken, *Roger de Piles’ Theory of Art* (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1985); and Jacqueline Lichtenstein, *The Eloquence of Color: Rhetoric and Painting in the French Classical Age*, trans. Emily McVarish (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1993). On de Piles’s inclusion in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* and his influence on early American aesthetics, see Brandon Brame Fortune, “Portraits of Virtue and Genius: Pantheons of Worthies and Public Portraiture in the Early American Republic, 1780–1920” (Ph.D. dissertation, Univ. of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1987), p. 174.
- 32 See, for example, Thomas Bardwell, *Practice of Painting and Perspective Made Easy* (London, 1756), pp. 61–62.
- 33 Jean Dubreuil, *Bowles’s Practice of Perspective* (London: Carrington Bowles, 1782), p. 78. On possible sources for the *Staircase Group* in European painting, see William H. Gerdtz and Russell Burke, *American Still-Life Painting* (New York, Washington, and London: Praeger Publishers, 1971), p. 237; and Martin Battersby, *Trompe l’Oeil: The Eye Deceived* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1974). On the trompe l’oeil staircase painted in a church at Thompson Village, Connecticut, see Nina Fletcher Little, *American Decorative Wall Painting 1700–1850* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1972), p. 113.
- 34 Reynolds, *Discourses*, p. 50.
- 35 *Selected Papers* 2:1087–88, 3:675, and 5:327–28. For Peale’s comment to Rembrandt, see Miller, ed., *The Collected Papers of Charles Willson Peale and His Family, 1735–1885*, microfiche ed. (Millwood, N.Y.: Published for the National Portrait Gallery, 1980), IIA, 61, D3. For Peale’s comment on the *Staircase Group*, see *Selected Papers* 5:450; for his letter to Rubens, see *Selected Papers* 4:302.
- 36 Charles du Fresnoy, *The Art of Painting*, second ed. (London, 1716), pp. 61–63. On Peale’s edition of du Fresnoy, see Schimmelman, “A Checklist of European Treatises,” p. 127; for Jennings’s gift, see *Selected Papers* 1:104; and for Palomino, see Lloyd, “A Death in the Family,” pp. 8 and 13, n. 16. Peale’s copy of Palomino is in the Philadelphia Museum of Art Library.
- 37 Philadelphia Museum of Art, *Philadelphia: Three Centuries*, p. 167.