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Unveiling Raphaelle Peale's *Venus Rising from the Sea—A Deception*

Lauren Lessing and Mary Schafer

New technical information uncovered by conservator Mary Schafer has revealed an earlier, unfinished composition beneath the margins of Raphaelle Peale's circa 1822 trompe l'oeil painting "Venus Rising from the Sea—A Deception." The earlier version of the painting featured a partial copy of Charles Willson Peale's 1817 portrait of Raphaelle seemingly concealed behind the same white kerchief that now appears to hide a copy of James Barry's 1772 painting "The Birth of Venus." Schafer and art historian Lauren Lessing reinterpret Peale's painting in light of these findings, describing its complex nature as both a physical object and a dark visual joke.

SOMETIME AROUND 1822, Raphaelle Peale painted *Venus Rising from the Sea—A Deception*, a partial copy of the Irish artist James Barry's 1772 painting *The Birth of Venus* seemingly

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covered by a dazzling trompe l'oeil white linen cloth (fig. 1). The resulting illusion is so appealingly mysterious that it invites speculation. Over the years since the painting was rediscovered in the late 1920s, art historians have published a host of various and competing interpretations of it. In 2004, a technical examination undertaken in preparation for a catalog of American paintings in the collection of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art revealed crucial new information about the painting—the existence of an earlier, underlying composition.¹ From the moment of this discovery, we embarked on a collaborative investigation that uncovered, both literally and figuratively, new evidence related to the construction of Peale's composition and his shifting, complex intentions. In the spirit of collaboration, this article is written by both curator (then Nelson-Atkins research associate in American Art Lauren Lessing) and conservator (Assistant Paintings Conservator Mary Schafer), an arrangement that the complicated nature of the painting all but dictated. Our essay provides an outline of technical

¹ Margaret C. Conrads, ed., *American Paintings to 1945: The Collections of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art* (Kansas City, MO: Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 2007). An essay about this painting, written by Lauren Lessing and based, in part, on a much earlier essay by Margaret Stenz, appears in *ibid.*, 1:432–39. This article is intended to supplement and enhance the catalog essay. It is an extended version with subsequent scientific analysis of a paper delivered at the 2007 College Art Association meeting in New York, in the panel session "What's So Funny? Senses of Humor in 19th-Century American Visual Culture," chaired by Sarah Burns and Jennifer Greenhill.



Fig. 1. Raphaelle Peale, *Venus Rising from the Sea—a Deception*, ca. 1822. Oil on canvas; H. 29 $\frac{1}{8}$ " , W. 24 $\frac{1}{8}$ ". (Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, MO, William Rockhill Nelson Trust purchase, 34-147; photo, Jamison Miller.)

findings and a reinterpretation of *Venus Rising from the Sea—a Deception*.

Despite extensive art-historical research associated with *Venus Rising from the Sea—a Deception*, no formal technical study existed before the museum cataloging project. Both technical findings and a synthesis of previous pentimenti investigations are presented to clear up discrepancies and resolve lingering questions about the painting's pentimenti. In addition to clarifying the technical information, a review of past research acknowledges the work of others, which provided a critical framework for the 2004 technical examination. From a broader standpoint, a discussion of past and present pentimenti research underscores the need for collaborative partnerships among art historians and conservators.

Pentimenti and the Effects of Age, Drying Paint, and Restoration

Pentimento literally translates to "repentance" or "change of mind" and refers to an artist change that, in some cases, gradually emerges as the paint film ages.² Pentimenti on *Venus Rising from the Sea—a Deception* were first detected in 1967 during the "Peale Family" exhibit in Detroit, organized by Edward Dwight, Charles Elam, and Charles Coleman Sellers.³ Dwight and Elam noticed faint perimeter shapes that were oddly similar to a painting hanging nearby, *Portrait of Raphaelle Peale*, painted in 1817 by Raphaelle's father, Charles Willson Peale (fig. 2).

Pentimento shapes (most identified in earlier publications) are described completely here (fig. 3).⁴ Like the portrait, the pentimento on the upper-right corner of *Venus Rising from the Sea—a Deception* includes a framed still life, featuring a red piece of fruit (A). Faint parallel lines within the gold frame (B) suggest a simple angular profile. On the lower-right quadrant, a dark shape with a distinct vertical edge (C) matches that of the sitter's jacket, and magnification confirms the presence of underlying

dark blue paint (fig. 4). Three distinct shapes are visible on the lower-left quadrant. Light brown diagonal bands (D) resemble the cluster of paintbrushes on the left side of Charles Willson Peale's portrait, and above the brushes, a light brown shape (E) repeats the angle of the chair. Peach paint is visible below the chair at the edge of the cloth (F), and its color, shape, and location correspond to the sitter's proper right hand (fig. 5). A second area of peach paint at the bottom edge of the cloth matches Raphaelle's left thumb (G), which supports the red-toned palette (H; fig. 6). Finally, in the portrait, Raphaelle holds a brush loaded with red paint, and on *Venus Rising from the Sea—a Deception*, the pentimento of a single red paint stroke (I) is evident on the left side of the underlying palette.

The visibility of pentimenti on *Venus Rising from the Sea—a Deception* can be attributed to traction cracks, mechanical cracks, increased paint transparency, and paint abrasion. Traction cracks, or drying cracks, are caused by differential drying rates among paint layers. When an upper paint layer dries faster than earlier applications, it contracts upon drying and forms a cracklike pattern that may expose slivers of underlying paint (fig. 7). Traction cracks directly relate to the artist's materials and technique, such as the ratio of pigment to binder and whether the paint was applied in accordance with the "fat over lean" rule.⁵ Fine mechanical cracks, or age cracks, develop over time as the paint film loses flexibility and responds to the tension and movement of the stretched canvas. Depending on the aperture, these age-related cracks may offer views of underlying paint, ground, and occasionally even the canvas (fig. 8). These two types of cracking systems are the primary reason pentimenti shapes are visible on *Venus Rising from the Sea—a Deception*.

In addition to crack formation, the aging process can affect the optical properties of paint with changes to the refractive index, a measurement of how light bends when it moves from one material into another. Whether paint is opaque or transparent is determined by the refractive index of both pigment and medium. A wide disparity between these two values leads to increased reflection of light and opacity (this accounts for the

² For several examples of pentimenti accompanied by photographs, see Andrea Kirsh and Rustin S. Levenson, *Seeing through Paintings* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 126.

³ Charles Coleman Sellers, *Charles Willson Peale* (New York: Scribner, 1969), 482 n. 5. The initial discovery is also described in Charles Coleman Sellers's letter to George McKenna, September 13, 1967, Nelson-Atkins Museum conservation file 81.11.117 R94.

⁴ See Dorinda Evans, "Raphaelle Peale's *Venus Rising from the Sea*: Further Support for a Change in Interpretation," *American Art Journal* 14 (Summer 1982): 72; and Phoebe Lloyd, "Philadelphia Story," *Art in America* 76 (November 1988): 165.

⁵ The "fat over lean" rule is a basic guideline for paint application. The fat refers to medium-rich, slow-drying paint, whereas the lean is absorbent, fast-drying paint containing less medium. The rule advises that initial applications of paint should be lean, followed by increasing amounts of medium. Medium-rich glazes should be applied in the final stages. For further discussion, see Kirsh and Levenson, *Seeing through Paintings*, 155.



Fig. 2. Charles Willson Peale, *Portrait of Raphaëlle Peale*, 1817. Oil on canvas; H. 29", W. 24". (Private collection.)

tremendous hiding power of lead white paint). For somewhat transparent paint, like the brown background of *Venus Rising from the Sea—a Deception*, the refractive indexes are quite similar and shift even closer together as the paint ages, producing greater transmission of light and increased transparency.⁶ Put simply, the aging process may cause

upper layers of paint to become more transparent and compositional elements that were once covered by the artist may emerge over time. For example, on *Venus Rising from the Sea—a Deception*, a pentimento of the chair may be caused by increased transparency of the brown background paint.⁷

⁶ For additional information on the optical properties of paint, see W. Stanley Taft Jr. and James W. Mayer, *The Science of Paintings* (New York: Springer, 2000), 66–75; and C. V. Horie, *Materials for Conservation: Organic Consolidants, Adhesives, and Coatings* (London: Butterworth, 1987), 26–27. For specific examples of increased paint

transparency, see Knut Nicolaus, *The Restoration of Paintings* (Cologne: Könemann, 1999), 126, 265; and Kirsh and Levenson, *Seeing through Paintings*, 161.

⁷ Other works by Raphaëlle Peale that may exhibit a similar change in paint transparency include *Orange and Book* (ca. 1817,



Fig. 3. Annotated fig. 1 with letters marking pentimento shape locations.

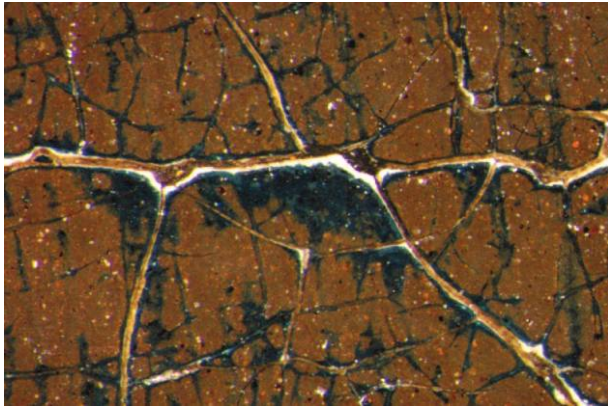


Fig. 4. Digital photomicrograph of painting in fig. 1 showing underlying blue paint (jacket), 25 \times .

Finally, a small amount of paint abrasion from an early restoration is evident on *Venus Rising from the Sea—a Deception*. Overly strong cleaning solvents can remove paint from the high points of impasto or, in the case of thin paint, abrade the slight peaks formed by the canvas weave texture (fig. 9). Paint abrasion on the lower-left corner of *Venus Rising from the Sea—a Deception* reveals the red palette more today than when the painting was freshly executed. All of these surface disruptions and changes—traction cracks, mechanical cracks, increased paint transparency, and paint abrasion—provide glimpses of underlying paint that were studied further during the technical examination.

Synthesis of Pentimenti Research

Early on, pentimenti shapes on *Venus Rising from the Sea—a Deception* were themselves rather decep-

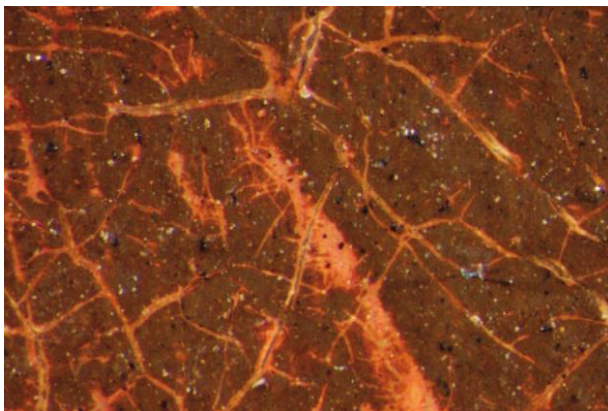


Fig. 5. Digital photomicrograph of painting in fig. 1 showing underlying peach paint (Raphaelle's hand), 20 \times .

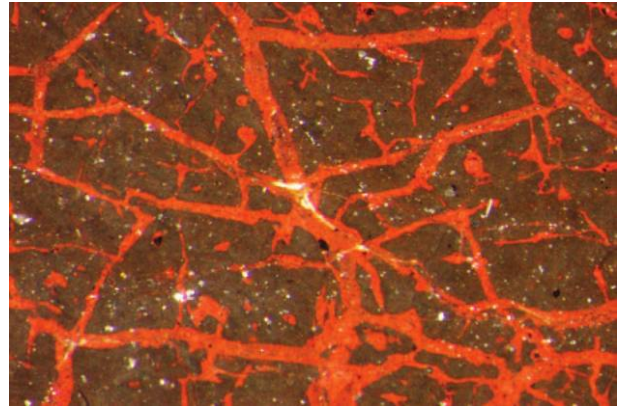


Fig. 6. Digital photomicrograph of painting in fig. 1 showing underlying red paint (palette), 20 \times .

tive. Shortly after Dwight and Elam's observations, Charles Coleman Sellers wrote to the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art seeking illustrations for an upcoming publication and briefly mentioned pentimenti.⁸ The museum registrar, George McKenna, responded that no pentimenti were observed during the recent conservation treatment that included x-radiography.⁹ For clarification, a second set of x-radiographs were generated but produced the same result. Given these findings, Sellers seemed satisfied that the shapes were some kind of apparition.¹⁰ But shortly thereafter he mailed a somewhat overexposed photograph of the painting that showed faint shapes along the painting's perimeter.¹¹ McKenna relayed the findings: "To the eye, the picture frame and the apparent hand on the book are, without doubt, visible."¹² Although further investigation using x-radiography provided no additional

oil on panel, private collection) and *Melons and Morning Glories* (1813, oil on canvas, Smithsonian American Art Museum). In *Melons and Morning Glories*, the edge of the watermelon is visible through a somewhat transparent cantaloupe, and in *Orange and Book*, a transparent knife in the foreground negates an otherwise convincing still life. It seems likely that Peale rendered these objects as solid forms, and the transparency of the paint has developed over time.

⁸ Letter from Charles Coleman Sellers to Laurence Sickman, Nelson-Atkins Museum director, September 13, 1967, Nelson-Atkins Museum registration file 34-147.

⁹ Letter from George McKenna to Charles Coleman Sellers, September 21, 1967, Nelson-Atkins Museum registration file 34-147.

¹⁰ Letter from Charles Coleman Sellers to George McKenna, September 25, 1967, Nelson-Atkins Museum registration file 34-147. In response to the x-ray results, Sellers wrote that "if the picture has been x-rayed, and no such underpainting detected, all this might have been an optical illusion of some sort."

¹¹ Letter from Charles Coleman Sellers to George McKenna, October 7, 1967, Nelson-Atkins Museum registration file 34-147.

¹² Letter from George McKenna to Charles Coleman Sellers, November 22, 1967, Nelson-Atkins Museum registration file 34-147.

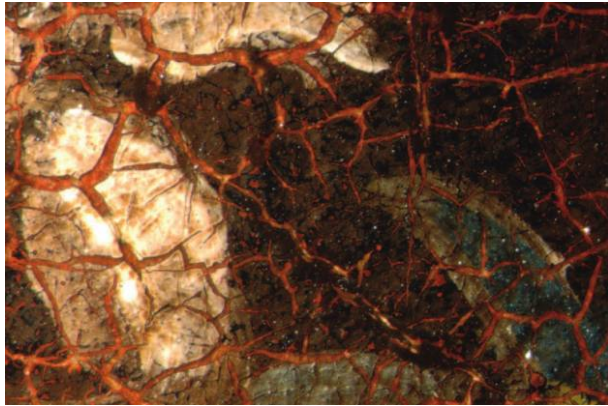


Fig. 7. Digital photomicrograph of painting in fig. 1 showing traction cracks in the flowers near Venus's foot, 20 \times .

information, museum staff confirmed areas of pentimenti, presumably in relation to Charles Willson Peale's portrait. Sellers concluded that Peale had painted a copy of his father's portrait beneath *Venus Rising from the Sea—a Deception* and published the finding in his 1969 biography of Charles Willson Peale.¹³

The exchange between McKenna and Sellers raises the issue of photography and lighting in relation to evidence of pentimenti. Publication photographs of *Venus Rising from the Sea—a Deception* were slightly underexposed to emphasize the subtle gradations of the draped cloth, thereby producing a darker background that concealed pentimenti. If an art historian relied on these photographs in his or her research without taking the opportunity to view the physical painting under appropriate lighting conditions, the subtle pentimenti shapes would be completely hidden. After viewing Dwight's overexposed photograph, McKenna refers to these photography choices and the high contrast of Peale's composition in his response to Sellers: "We, of course, concentrated on showing all the nuances of the cloth, which, in Mr. Dwight's shot, is bleached of all detail."¹⁴

These prior discussions among art historians, registrars, and conservators call attention to the complexity of *Venus Rising from the Sea—a Deception* and its illusive layers. Similar challenges, some of which were never completely resolved, arose several years later when Sellers's theory of an underlying composition was revisited. For example, James

¹³ Sellers, *Charles Willson Peale*, 482 n. 5.

¹⁴ Letter from George McKenna to Charles Coleman Sellers, November 22, 1967, Nelson-Atkins Museum registration file 34-147.



Fig. 8. Digital photomicrograph of painting in fig. 1 showing mechanical cracks in the white paint of the cloth, 20 \times .

Roth, the conservator who confirmed pentimenti on the painting after viewing Dwight's photograph, retired in 1973. Following Roth's retirement, the conservation file contained no copies of the overexposed photograph, the correspondence between Sellers and McKenna, or any other notes regarding pentimenti. This absence of critical information became apparent in 1981 when Roth's replacement, Forrest Bailey, was asked about pentimenti on the painting, specifically whether part of a still life and hand were visible in raking light and whether x-radiography revealed a head beneath the cloth.¹⁵ Bailey confirmed the still life but seemed to be unaware of the painting's connection to Charles Willson Peale's portrait, given that he initially described pentimenti on the lower left in relation to the female figure rather than a separate, underlying composition: "What appears to be discarded clothing to me might also be interpreted by someone else as a crude hand holding a writing instrument."¹⁶ Although many trained eyes were focused intently on Raphaelle's painting, it is possible that pentimenti were less obvious twenty-five years ago or that an unsaturated varnish concealed the faint shapes before the 1994 treatment.¹⁷

¹⁵ Letter from Dorinda Evans to Ross Taggart, Nelson-Atkins Museum senior curator, July 6, 1981, Nelson-Atkins Museum conservation file 81.11.117 R94.

¹⁶ Letter from Forrest Bailey, Nelson-Atkins Museum conservator, to Dorinda Evans, December 2, 1981, Nelson-Atkins Museum conservation file 81.11.117 R94. At the time of Bailey's examination, the female figure in *Venus Rising from the Sea—a Deception* was not yet linked to James Barry's *The Birth of Venus*.

¹⁷ See the 1994 treatment report in the Nelson-Atkins Museum conservation file 81.11.117 R94. The treatment included grime removal and the application of mastic varnish (7 percent mastic with the addition of 3 percent Tinuvin 292) to increase the saturation of the varnish.

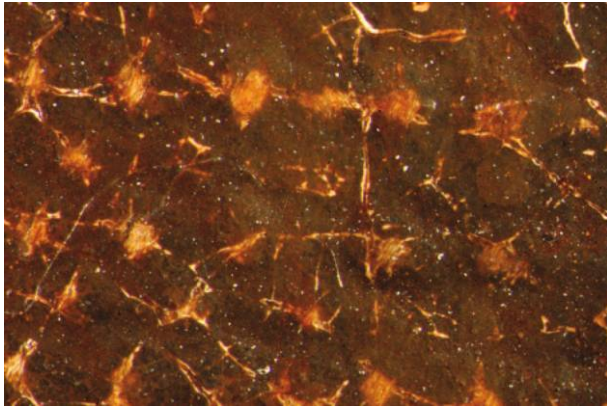


Fig. 9. Digital photomicrograph of painting in fig. 1 showing abrasion of the brown background paint exposing ground and canvas threads, 20 \times .

In addition to communication setbacks and incomplete files, early correspondence among conservators, registrars, and curators occurred primarily through letters, leading to prolonged delays in the exchange of information. Laborious exhibition schedules and treatment priorities may have limited the amount of time conservators could devote to technical examination since this type of research is rarely considered routine and most often undertaken during a cataloging project. Finally, it is useful to recognize the language barrier that can exist between conservators and curators in the discussion of a painting as well as the advantages of a strong working relationship.

In the past, it seems that individuals who inquired about the painting relied heavily on results from specific examination techniques such as x-radiography and infrared reflectography.¹⁸ Both techniques are often essential tools in the identification of underdrawings, artist changes, and underlying compositions, but they offer little insight regarding pentimenti on *Venus Rising from the Sea—a Deception*, which is why every observation should be considered part of a larger examination process. For example, infrared reflectography is an examination technique that detects carbon-based materials, such as graphite, charcoal, and ink, and therefore it is commonly used to identify artist changes or

¹⁸ A letter from Dorinda Evans, July 6, 1981, requests x-rays of the painting to determine whether there is a face beneath the cloth. Another x-ray request on January 5, 1988, by Meredith Ward of Hirsch and Adler Galleries investigates whether there is a still life beneath the painting. Ward returned the x-rays with a letter (September 23, 1988) that noted that "Mr. Feld has examined them and is satisfied that no still life is present under the painting." These letters are located in the Nelson-Atkins Museum conservation file 81.11.117 R94.

preparatory drawings.¹⁹ In the presence of lead-based paint, however, infrared radiation often scatters, failing to penetrate the paint film. This type of interference occurs on the lead white cloth of *Venus Rising from the Sea—a Deception*, and consequently it is difficult to learn more about what might lie beneath the paint (fig. 10).²⁰ When this same examination method is used to study the perimeter, the pentimenti shapes, including the curving right edge of the palette, become more legible.

The second technique, x-radiography, records the selective absorption of x-rays by pigments containing heavy metals.²¹ These dense pigments block x-rays from reaching the film, which is why the lead white cloth of *Venus Rising from the Sea—a Deception* stands out as a light-colored region (fig. 11).²² Flesh tones and highlights often contain some lead white paint, making these areas more prominent on an x-radiograph, but there are no dense paint strokes in the central region of the painting, where one would expect to find Raphaelle's face. Likewise, there is no sign of Venus or pentimenti shapes. Of course, an x-radiograph captures simultaneous information about the painting's entire structure and can be somewhat ambiguous and difficult to decipher. The cloth is certainly the dominant feature on the x-radiograph, and no face is apparent, but these results do not refute Seller's theory of an overall underlying portrait. Peale could have applied thin

¹⁹ Infrared radiation, part of the invisible range of the electromagnetic spectrum, is able to penetrate the paint film and interact with underlying pigments according to their individual absorption/emission properties. These different responses to infrared, particularly the strong absorption of carbon-based underdrawing media, are captured by infrared-sensitive photographic equipment. For a description of this technique and its applications in painting conservation, see Taft and Mayer, *Science of Paintings*, 76–79. Also see Franz Mairinger, "The Infrared Examination of Paintings," in *Radiation in Art and Archeometry*, ed. D. C. Creagh and D. A. Bradley (New York: Elsevier, 2000), 40–42, 51–55.

²⁰ The painting was examined with a 1994 Hamamatsu C/1000-03 Vidicon camera with a B-2606-10 PbS tube and a Nikon 55 mm lens fitted with a Kodak 87A filter. John Twilley, conservation scientist and science advisor to the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, also used broad bandpass filtering to restrict the Vidicon response to the more transmissive region of the spectrum between 1.2 and 1.6 microns, which produced somewhat improved contrast among pentimenti shapes. Figure 10 was captured using a Nikon D200 camera with a 60 mm lens calibrated for infrared photography.

²¹ For an overview of x-radiography in the study of paintings, see Janet Lang and Andrew Middleton, eds., *Radiography of Cultural Material* (London: Butterworth-Heinemann, 1997), 98–116; and Taft and Mayer, *Science of Paintings*, 79–80.

²² The 1988 x-radiographs (no. 203 in Nelson-Atkins Museum conservation files) were created with Kodak Industrex AA film using a 1952 GE model F, type 4 x-ray unit. Three of the four sections of film were created under the following conditions: 45 kV and 60 mA with a focal film distance of 30". One of the four sections of film had the same conditions, except with 55 mA.



Fig. 10. Reflected infrared digital photograph of painting in fig. 1.



Fig. 11. Digital composite of x-radiographs related to the painting in fig. 1.

paint beneath the cloth, using pigments that are not dense enough for detection by x-radiography.

The weight once given to x-radiography in the interpretation of the painting may originate from the 1976 publication *Bright Stars: American Paintings and Sculpture since 1776*, which states erroneously that “x-rays have revealed, [Peale] painted the picture over the replica of a portrait his father had made of him in 1817.”²³ In 1981, Dorinda Evans wrote to the museum, citing the elder Peale’s portrait and requesting x-radiographs.²⁴ Following communication with conservator Forrest Bailey, Evans published the following statement: “[Seller’s theory of an underlying portrait] has been accepted as fact by others. There is little to substantiate his argument, however, since neither the still life nor hand correspond exactly to those in the portrait and no one has ever found the head or vestiges of the rest of the picture. The hand—if indeed it is a hand which is questionable—is, in fact, in quite a different position.”²⁵ It appears that variations in proportion be-

tween the two paintings, such as the height of the chair and hand, may have momentarily weakened the perceived connection between the two paintings.²⁶ Evans acknowledged the existence of an underlying composition but rightly challenged Sellers’s theory of a copied portrait based on responses to her technical inquiries.

Evans’s article marks a shift from definitive statements about an underlying copied portrait to more cautious descriptions of pentimenti. The impact of her research is evident in Roger Stein’s revision of his 1981 article, ten years later, in which he accurately describes the pentimenti: “And barely visible around the edges of this deception piece are the shapes which he has copied out of his father’s 1817 portrait of him ‘in the character of the painter.’”²⁷ Stein attributes his revision to Evans’s 1982 argument as well as Phoebe Lloyd’s 1988 article, which references x-radiographs: “the possibility that Raphaëlle painted over a version of his father’s 1817 portrait can be dismissed.”²⁸ Wendy Bellion’s 2002 essay in *Deceptions and Illusions: Five Centuries of Trompe L’oeil Painting* clarified pentimenti shapes even further: “When viewed in a raking light, the margins of the painting reveal pentimenti that correspond to sections of the elder Peale’s *Portrait of Raphaëlle Peale* (1817, private collection).”²⁹ These recent publications accurately describe pentimenti and link the two paintings without question, but there is little discussion of Peale’s rationale for inserting these shapes except to suggest a form of self-oblivation.³⁰ Without a detailed technical examination, it was also unclear how pentimenti fit within the overall construction of the painting.

1981, Nelson-Atkins Museum conservation file 81.11.117 R94. Evans, “Raphaëlle Peale’s *Venus Rising from the Sea*,” 72.

²⁶ Photocopies of Dwight’s and Elam’s 1967 photograph and Charles Willson Peale’s portrait were enclosed with Dorinda Evans’s letter, December 7, 1981, Nelson-Atkins Museum conservation file 81.11.117 R94. Evans correctly noted the framed painting and brushes, but the back of the chair seems to be labeled as a hand: “apparently interpreted as fingers but it does not correspond to the portrait of Raphaëlle.”

²⁷ Roger B. Stein, “Charles Willson Peale’s Expressive Design: The Artist in His Museum,” in *New Perspectives on Charles Willson Peale, a 250th Anniversary Celebration*, ed. Lillian B. Miller and David C. Ward (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1991), 207–8.

²⁸ Lloyd, “Philadelphia Story,” 201 n. 32.

²⁹ See Wendy Bellion’s catalog entry on *Venus Rising from the Sea—a Deception*, in *Deceptions and Illusions: Five Centuries of Trompe l’Oeil Painting*, ed. Sybille Ebert-Schifferer, exhibit catalog (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, in association with Lund Humphries, 2002), 134.

³⁰ David C. Ward and Sidney Hart, “Subversion and Illusion in the Life and Art of Raphaëlle Peale,” *American Art* 8 (Summer/Fall 1994): 116–19.

²³ Jean Lipman and Helen Franc, *Bright Stars: American Paintings and Sculpture since 1776* (New York: Dutton, 1976), 41.

²⁴ Letter from Dorinda Evans, July 6, 1981, Nelson-Atkins Museum conservation file 81.11.117 R94.

²⁵ Letter by Ross Taggart, senior curator, July 21, 1981. Also see letter and examination report by Forrest Bailey, December 2,

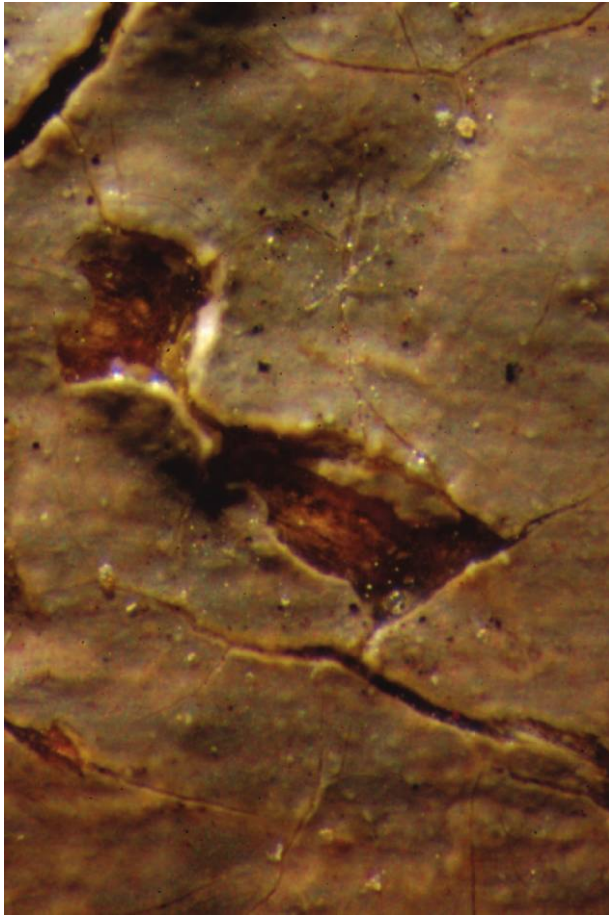


Fig. 12. Digital photomicrograph of painting in fig. 1 showing shadow area of cloth, 40 \times .

During the technical examination, the paint surface was carefully studied using the Leica MZ APO binocular microscope with a magnifying power up to 40 \times . A network of fine, somewhat open cracks throughout the central cloth appeared to expose only three layers: gray paint, white ground, and bare canvas (fig. 12). To verify these observations, small paint samples were obtained from the cloth for cross-sectional analysis.³¹ The first sample, taken from the lower center of the cloth, on the left side of the bisecting crease, reveals in its cross section that thin lead white paint representing the draped cloth was laid directly on a coarse ground layer consist-

³¹ Cross-sectional analysis (seven samples total), scanning electron microscopy (SEM), energy dispersive x-ray spectrometry, and expanded infrared reflectography were carried out by John Twilley through the conservation science pilot project at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, generously funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Twilley's full report is located in the Nelson-Atkins Museum conservation file 81.11.117 R94.

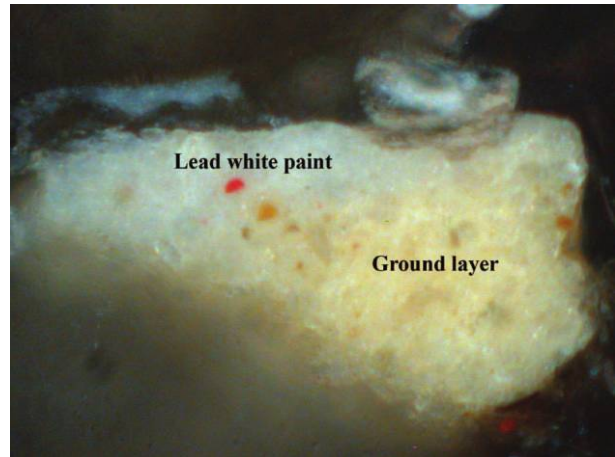


Fig. 13. Cross section from painting in fig. 1 taken from lower center of cloth, 500 \times . (Photo, John Twilley.)

ing of lead white and calcium carbonate (fig. 13).³² The two layers are more easily differentiated with SEM in figure 14.³³ A second paint sample was obtained from the folded-over portion of cloth near the central vertical crease. In cross section, this paint sample contains the same simple construction of ground and lead white paint.³⁴ Sampling sites were selected to coincide with the theoretical location of Raphaelle's face beneath the cloth, but cross sections show no trace of flesh tones, yellow vest, or other elements from Charles Willson Peale's portrait. Cross sections also verify that the brown paint covering pentimenti is absent from beneath the cloth. Other paint samples taken from the cloth's edges (adjacent to the palette and frame) produced identical results.³⁵

The binocular microscope enables conservators to peek into cracks; glimpse underlying strata; and, in some cases, determine the order in which

³² John Twilley, conservation analysis report, September 8, 2008, Nelson-Atkins Museum conservation file 81.11.117 R94. This cross section corresponds to sample 6 in Twilley's report. Additional elements shown in this cross section are a light blue polish or residue above the transparent varnish layer at top left, a light blue oblong shape at top right representing the splint used to hold the sample, and individual red and orange pigment particles. Elemental information was obtained during SEM examination using an energy dispersive x-ray spectrometer.

³³ The paint samples were given a conductive coating of evaporated carbon and examined with a Leo 1550 LEI scanning electron microscope. The image, fig. 14, was acquired in the backscatter electron mode with a beam voltage of 20 kV, magnification of 1,680 \times , and a working distance of 11 mm. E-mail communication with John Twilley, April 23, 2009.

³⁴ John Twilley, conservation analysis report, September 8, 2008, Nelson-Atkins Museum conservation file 81.11.117 R94. This cross section corresponds to sample 7 in Twilley's report.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

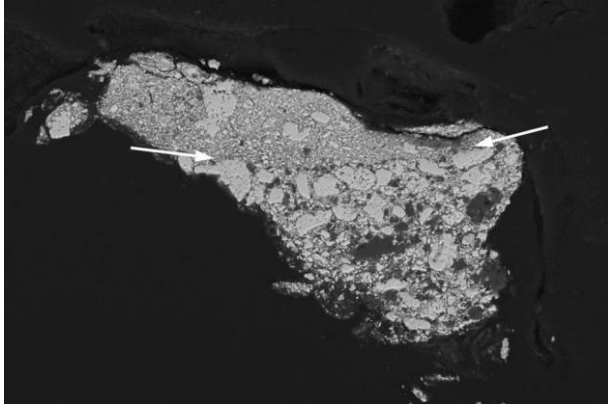


Fig. 14. Scanning electron microscopy backscattered electron image of paint cross section in fig. 13 showing ground layer below arrows and lead white paint above, 1,680 \times . (Photo, John Twilley.)

compositional elements were painted. In his 1981 examination report, Forrest Bailey observed “the arm with hair, and feet with flowers seem to have been added after the cloth and ribbon were painted.”³⁶ The photomicrograph in figure 15, taken from the top edge of the cloth, reveals a pink diagonal brushstroke from Venus’s arm covering the white cloth. The layering of the paint indicates that Peale painted the cloth first before adding Venus’s arm and feet to its edges in two separate steps. Using this same approach we can, to some extent, determine how pentimenti shapes were painted in relation to the cloth. For example, the photomicrograph in figure 16 shows three paint layers on the lower-left edge of the cloth: the white paint of the cloth, the peach paint of Raphaelle’s hand in the copied portrait, and the brown background paint. The peach paint extends past the overlying brown background paint and rests on top of the white paint, which indicates that the hand was added after the cloth and then covered with brown paint. Similarly, figure 17 shows the upper edge of the cloth, where a thin streaked wash of orange paint associated with the frame lies on top of the white cloth. A cross section from this area reveals, from earlier to later, a thick white ground, lead white paint representing the cloth, and a thin upper layer of orange paint (fig. 18).³⁷

³⁶ Examination report by Forrest Bailey, November 27, 1981, Nelson-Atkins Museum conservation file 81.11.117 R94.

³⁷ John Twilley, conservation analysis report, September 8, 2008, Nelson-Atkins Museum conservation file 81.11.117 R94. This cross section corresponds to sample 3 in Twilley’s report. The translucent white shape at the top left of the image is caused by the splint that holds the sample.

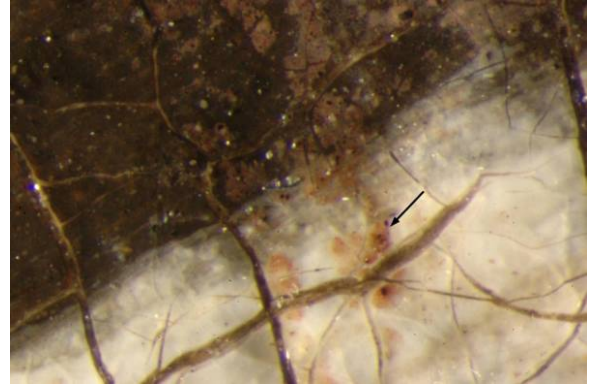


Fig. 15. Digital photomicrograph of painting in fig. 1 showing top edge of cloth and peach paint of Venus’s arm (see arrow), 40 \times .

Like Raphaelle’s hand on the lower left, the frame was painted after the cloth. Based on the order in which these three compositional elements were painted (Venus’s arm, Raphaelle’s hand, and the



Fig. 16. Digital photomicrograph of painting in fig. 1 taken from the lower-left edge of cloth showing paint sequence of white (cloth) and peach (hand), 40 \times .

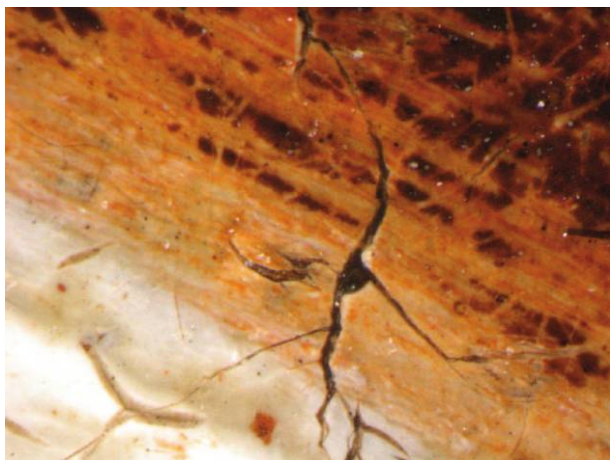


Fig. 17. Digital photomicrograph of painting in fig. 1 at upper edge of cloth showing paint sequence of white (cloth) and orange (frame), 20×. (Photo, John Twilley.)

upper frame), as indicated by cross sections and magnification, it appears that the cloth preceded the pentimenti shapes that border its edges as well as the Venus figure. Raphaelle never rendered a full copy of the elder Peale's portrait.

Reassessment of the Painting

The compilation of technical findings—the absence of additional paint beneath the cloth; the lack of a connection between sections of pentimenti; the reasons pentimenti are visible today; and, in particular, the sequence in which compositional elements were painted in relation to the cloth—suggest that Peale painted two separate composi-

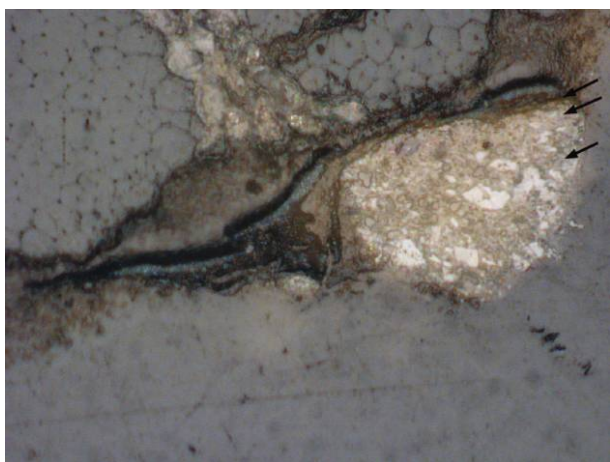


Fig. 18. Cross section from painting in fig. 1 taken from upper-right edge of cloth, with arrows pointing to ground, white paint, and thin orange wash layer; bright field reflected light, 500×. (Photo, John Twilley.)



Fig. 19. Diagram illustrating Raphaelle Peale's first composition.

tions, the first of which he never completed. Peale's initial trompe l'oeil featured a white cloth seemingly covering his father's portrait (fig. 19). He rendered the central cloth first before adding elements of his father's earlier painting to its outer edges, a progression that might explain slight discrepancies in proportion between the actual and the copied portraits. The washlike quality of the perimeter shapes indicates that Peale never completed his initial composition. Instead, he reworked the painting, covering the perimeter elements with thin brown paint. In the final composition, Peale retained the general concept of his joke—the illusion of a cloth covering a known artwork—by turning to Barry's painting *The Birth of Venus*. With the addition of Venus's arm and foot to the top and bottom of the cloth, Peale reused the central cloth, and the transition from one composition to another is simple and seemingly effortless (fig. 20).

One counterargument to this conclusion is that Raphaelle may have reused an abandoned canvas, perhaps even acquiring one from his father, and sanded down an unfinished portrait before painting *Venus Rising from the Sea—a Deception*. Yet technical findings indicate that in the painting's overall construction, the cloth preceded the perimeter shapes (see figs. 16 and 17), and therefore the pentimenti cannot be considered earlier fragments



Fig. 20. Diagram illustrating Raphaëlle Peale's second composition.

from an incomplete work. Furthermore, the brown background paint that covers pentimenti, in this theory, would have been applied to the entire canvas to mask an unfinished painting, but cross sections show that the intermediary layer is absent from beneath the cloth.

A second alternative theory, introduced by Phoebe Lloyd in 1988, raises the issue of the artist's intentions with regard to pentimenti: "Clearly Raphaëlle intended the naked eye to see what might understandably be taken for pentimenti. . . . For his are not true pentimenti—that is, underpaintings which begin to show through as the top layer of paint rubs thin with time. Rather, they were meant to be seen from the work's inception, and so comprise a technique that might be given the novel designation of *trompe-l'oeil* pentimento."³⁸ This interpretation is valid as long as the perimeter shapes are visible due to Peale's painting technique, rather than the combined effects of age, drying paint, and restoration. Instead, pentimenti are apparent mainly because of mechanical and traction cracks, the formation of which would be very difficult for an artist to anticipate or control.

³⁸ Lloyd, "Philadelphia Story," 165.

A convincing interpretation of *Venus Rising from the Sea—a Deception* requires a collaborative approach, one that combines the conservator's material evidence with the curator's research skills in order to be successful. Although recognizing that no individual professional should be held accountable for information outside his or her expertise, this project emphasizes the usefulness of interdisciplinary study; without it, individuals may inadvertently overlook important clues. For example, without the aid of magnification, a curator may misinterpret the painting's stepwise construction. Conversely, a conservator might observe faint pentimenti shapes but lack the broader historical context necessary for an accurate identification.

We were fortunate, in our collaborative research on the American paintings in the Nelson-Atkins Museum's collection, to be able to communicate directly with one another nearly every day and to have the objects themselves before our eyes. In the case of *Venus Rising from the Sea—a Deception*, the pentimenti that emerge so clearly under bright light sparked parallel and intertwined investigations. Our discoveries, which we have continued to make and share with one another even after the publication of the Nelson-Atkins catalog in 2007, shed new light not only on Peale's process of constructing the painting but also on the reasons why he painted it and what he meant to say.³⁹ The new vision of the painting that emerges from our collaboration dispels lingering misconceptions while weaving together many of the disparate threads explored by previous scholars. It connects Peale's painting both to his troubled life and to the broader context of his culture—in particular, the culture of early nineteenth-century American humor.

Since it resurfaced in a Connecticut antique shop in the late 1920s, critics and art historians have

³⁹ As Jacqueline Macnaughten and Sue-Anne Wallace have made clear, open-minded dialogue and collaboration between art historians and conservators often lead to new interpretations of artworks. Macnaughten and Wallace cochaired a conference on this topic in 1992 and, together with Jodi Parvey, edited a collection of the conference papers that was published four years later. See Macnaughten, Wallace, and Parvey, eds., *The Articulate Surface: Dialogues on Paintings between Conservators, Curators, and Art Historians* (Canberra: Humanities Research Centre, Australian National University, and National Gallery of Australia, 1996), v. Thoughtful, open discussions between conservators and art historians on the subject of collaboration are also compiled in Mark Leonard, ed., *Personal Viewpoints: Thoughts about Paintings Conservation* (Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute, 2003). Maryann Ainsworth's article "From Connoisseurship to Technical History: The Evolution of the Interdisciplinary Study of Art," *Conservation at the Getty Newsletter* 20, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 4–10, provides a chronology of collaborative research and discusses ways to strengthen relationships among conservators and curators.

advanced a broad range of competing theories about the meaning of Peale's small painting.⁴⁰ In 1982, Dorinda Evans correctly identified the work as *Venus Rising from the Sea—a Deception*, a partial copy of the Irish artist James Barry's 1772 painting *The Birth of Venus*, seemingly covered by a trompe l'oeil white linen cloth (fig. 21). Despite the obvious humor of its original title, interpretations of *Venus Rising from the Sea—a Deception* have focused, in the last twenty years, on Peale's difficult relationship with his father; his failing health; his engagement with Romanticism; and the social, political, and artistic climate of early nineteenth-century Philadelphia. Largely lost in these recent studies has been the fact that Peale intended his painting to be a visual joke—one that (like the painting itself) is both layered and complex. Peale's painting is both a "deception"—an attempt to trick viewers, for a moment, into believing they are seeing something they are not—and a satirical comment on the contentious issue of the nude in art.⁴¹ As the physical evidence demonstrates, *Venus Rising from the Sea—a Deception* also holds within its layers of paint another much darker joke—one that Peale began to tell but stopped. All of Peale's humor in this work—whether obvious, subtle, or hidden—is steeped in the comic sensibilities of the early nineteenth century.

In Philadelphia in the 1820s, eighteenth-century notions of the comic— notions that embraced irony, deception, sex, and violence—had not yet been entirely displaced by new middle-class standards of decorum. English satirical prints, which depict sex, violence, and bodily functions explicitly for humorous effect, were available for purchase in Philadelphia.⁴² Furthermore, Philadelphia publishers,

with little regard for either copyright or decorum, freely reprinted bawdy English prose in their journals and almanacs.⁴³ In his teens, Raphaelle Peale probably visited the wax museum of his father's friend Daniel Bowen, who advertised the following exhibit in 1794: "One may also see a very surprising Venus, covered with a robe made from a single piece of silk. By means of an ingenious mechanism, one is able to place her in every imaginable position."⁴⁴ Peale, who loved jokes, might also have read such popular humor books as *A New Book of Oddities, and Literary Olio*, published in Philadelphia in 1803. Its anonymous author promised to "excite surprise, astonish the understanding, affect the feelings," and "create innocent merriment." His comic tales include one of a baker who made pies from murdered customers and who was discovered when a surprised patron pulled a child's finger from his pastry. In order to fully appreciate *Venus Rising from the Sea—a Deception*, one must view it against this backdrop of bawdy entertainment and gothic humor.⁴⁵

First, what was the joke that Peale ultimately told? On its most basic level, *Venus Rising from the Sea—a Deception* functions as a visual prank played upon Peale's audience. The painted white drapery seems literally to stand out against its dark background. Its deep, sagging, central fold and the shadows that surround it create the uncanny impression of an actual three-dimensional cloth resting against the flat surface of a painting. Furthermore, unlike the relatively painterly image it appears to conceal, the hanging fabric is rendered with such smoothness and clarity that viewers are tempted to reach out and touch it. In this way, Peale continued his own well-established practice of tricking his viewers, for comic effect, into momentarily believing a painted illusion.

⁴⁰ See, e.g., Alexander Nemerov, *The Body of Raphaelle Peale: Still Life and Selfhood, 1812–1824* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Ward and Hart, "Subversion and Illusion," 96–121; Lillian B. Miller, "Father and Son: The Relationship of Charles Willson Peale and Raphaelle Peale," *American Art Journal* 25 (1993): 5–61; Nicolai Cikovsky Jr., Linda Bantel, and John Wilmerding, *Raphaelle Peale Still Lifes*, exhibit catalog (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 1988); Lloyd, "Philadelphia Story," 155–202; Sellers, *Charles Willson Peale*; Dorothy C. Miller and Alfred H. Barr Jr., eds., *American Realists and Magic Realists*, exhibit catalog (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1943), 9–10, 63; Virginia Nirdlinger, "In the New York Galleries," *Parnassus* 4 (January 1932): 40; and "Rare Canvas by Son of Charles W. Peale to Be Shown Here," *New York Herald Tribune*, December 10, 1931, 27.

⁴¹ For a fascinating discussion of the trompe l'oeil mode in early American painting, see Wendy Ann Bellion, "Likeness and Deception in Early American Art" (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 2001).

⁴² For a thoughtful exploration of these prints and their subject matter, see Vic Gatrell, *City of Laughter: Sex and Satire in Eighteenth-Century London* (New York: Walker, 2006).

⁴³ Using a wealth of primary sources, including government documents, newspapers, tracts, popular prints, and the minutes of charitable societies, Clare A. Lyons has documented the successful middle-class effort to regulate sexuality and stamp out the flourishing "pleasure culture" of Philadelphia in the early national period. Lyons, *Sex among the Rabble: An Intimate History of Gender and Power in the Age of Revolution, Philadelphia, 1730–1830* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

⁴⁴ This notice appears several times in Philadelphia newspapers beginning in February 1794 and continuing through April of the same year. It is sometimes in English and other times in French. See, e.g., "Bowen's Exhibition of Waxworks," *Philadelphia Gazette*, February 27, 1794, 4; and "Curiosités en Cire," *Philadelphia Gazette*, April 10, 1794, 4. This second advertisement appears just above an advertisement for Peale's Museum.

⁴⁵ *A New Book of Oddities, and Literary Olio; or, Farical, Comical, Comi-Tragical, Tragical Historian* (Philadelphia: printed for Solomon Wieatt, 1803), 18–20.



Fig. 21. James Barry, *The Birth of Venus*, ca. 1772. Oil on canvas; H. 102½", W. 67". (Dublin City Gallery, the Hugh Lane.)

Peale began painting trompe l'oeil deceptions as a very young man.⁴⁶ Two surviving examples, both painted before *Venus Rising from the Sea—a Deception*, shed light on his style and comic intentions. *Catalogue Deception* depicts a dog-eared 1813 edition of the Peale Museum catalog dangling by one corner (through which a real nail once projected) against a green baize-covered wall, like those in Charles Willson Peale's Philadelphia museum (fig. 22).⁴⁷ It seems likely that the elder Peale displayed the ersatz catalog near his museum entrance, where passing visitors could have been fooled into reaching for it on their way in to see the exhibits. This would not have been the only practical joke on view in the Peale Museum. Once inside the galleries, visitors could also enjoy Charles Willson Peale's more famous painted deception *Staircase Group*, a trompe l'oeil portrait of Raphaelle and his younger brother Titian that incorporates a real wooden door frame and step. Both *Catalogue Deception* and *Staircase Group* evoke mirth, showcase the technical skill of the painters, and force viewers to question their perceptions.⁴⁸

The second, subtler extant trompe l'oeil painting by Raphaelle Peale is *Fruitpiece with Peaches* (fig. 23). At first glance, this painting seems to be a typical example of the artist's characteristic spare, elegantly arranged still lifes. It depicts a shallow bowl of peaches, covered by a diaphanous lady's kerchief and overflowing onto a shallow ledge. A closer look, however, reveals that the winged insects seemingly crawling across the surface of the painting are, themselves, painted.⁴⁹ Just as these trompe l'oeil wasps appear to have been deceived by the tantalizing illusion of the painted fruit, so the viewer is deceived by the illusion of the painted wasps. In this way, Peale not only played a prank on his audience; he also called attention to the nature of all painting as artifice.

⁴⁶ As a young artist, Raphaelle Peale exhibited two deceptions (now lost) in the 1795 Columbianum Exhibition in Philadelphia. See Lillian B. Miller, ed., *The Selected Papers of Charles Willson Peale and His Family*, 5 vols., (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983–2000), 2:114 n. 5. Phoebe Lloyd has also attributed an early nineteenth-century trompe l'oeil still life of dueling pistols to Raphaelle Peale, but this attribution (although certainly possible) is based largely on circumstantial evidence. See Lloyd, "Peale's Pistols: An Attribution to Raphaelle," *Maryland Historical Magazine* 90 (Spring 1995): 3–19.

⁴⁷ Lance Humphries, "A Trompe l'Oeil for Peale's Philadelphia Museum: *Catalogue Deception* and the Problem of Peale Family Attributions," *American Art Journal* 32 (2001): 4–44.

⁴⁸ Bellion, "Likeness and Deception in Early American Art," 7–10.

⁴⁹ Humphries, "Trompe l'Oeil for Peale's Philadelphia Museum," 35.

Peale continued in this vein with *Venus Rising from the Sea—a Deception*; however, he added a layer of satirical humor to this, the last of his painted deceptions, by poking fun at an encroaching culture of prudishness.⁵⁰ In his final composition for the painting, a trompe l'oeil cloth appears to have been pinned over a copy of Barry's *The Birth of Venus* in order to hide its risqué subject. Although only a few details of Barry's picture—Venus's upraised arm and hand holding her long blonde hair, and her bare feet amid flowers—appear around the edges of the cloth, the painting was well known to Peale's audience through at least two eighteenth-century engravings, and it would surely have been quickly recognized (fig. 24).⁵¹ As the crowds that saw Raphaelle Peale's painting in 1822 at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and Peale's Baltimore Museum would have been aware, the American painter John Vanderlyn, the Swedish émigré artist Adolph Ulric Wertmüller, and Peale's own brother Rembrandt had all recently been accused of indecency in American periodicals for painting nudes.⁵² Since 1811, the Pennsylvania Academy had exhibited its collection of nude statuary behind a cloth partition, allowing only single-sex groups to see them at any one time. In fact, as Peale and some members of his audience may have been aware, Barry's *Venus* itself was censored at an 1819 exhibition in Cork, Ireland.⁵³ With *Venus*

⁵⁰ For oblique commentaries on contemporary events in Peale's seemingly simple still lifes, see Lloyd, "Philadelphia Story," 158–62. For other discussions of Raphaelle's still lifes as social commentary, see Nicolai Cikovsky Jr., "Democratic Illusions," in Cikovsky, Bantel, and Wilmerding, *Raphaelle Peale Still Lifes*, 54–58; and Annie V. F. Storr, "Raphaelle Peale's Strawberries, Nuts, &c.: A Riddle of Enlightened Science," *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 21 (1995): 25–74.

⁵¹ In addition to the well-known 1772 mezzotint after Barry's *Venus* by the English engraver Valentine Green, an eighteenth-century "red chalk" engraving of the painting by a pupil of the Italian engraver Francesco Bartolozzi, printed on silk, has emerged on the art market. Engravings printed on silk were popular household ornaments. The fact that Barry's *Venus* was reproduced in this way attests to the painting's broad popularity. Louan Thompson, Oranmore Antiques, Dallas, e-mail message to Lauren Lessing, August 18, 2005, Nelson-Atkins Museum curatorial files.

⁵² See E. McSherry Fowble, "Without a Blush: The Movement toward Acceptance of the Nude as an Art Form in America, 1800–1825," *Winterthur Portfolio* 9 (1974): 103–21; and Carol Eaton Soltis, "'In Sympathy with the Heart': Rembrandt Peale, an American Artist and the Traditions of European Art" (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2000), 290–349. Soltis correctly places Raphaelle Peale's *Venus Rising from the Sea—a Deception* in the context of this controversy.

⁵³ Crawford Municipal Art Gallery, "A Chronological History of Art and Architecture in Nineteenth Century Cork, Incorporating a History of the Crawford Art Gallery and the Crawford School of Art," <http://www.crawfordartgallery.ie/> (accessed July 30, 2005). Colleen O'Sullivan, administrator of the Crawford Municipal Art Gallery in Cork, Ireland, kindly confirmed this information.

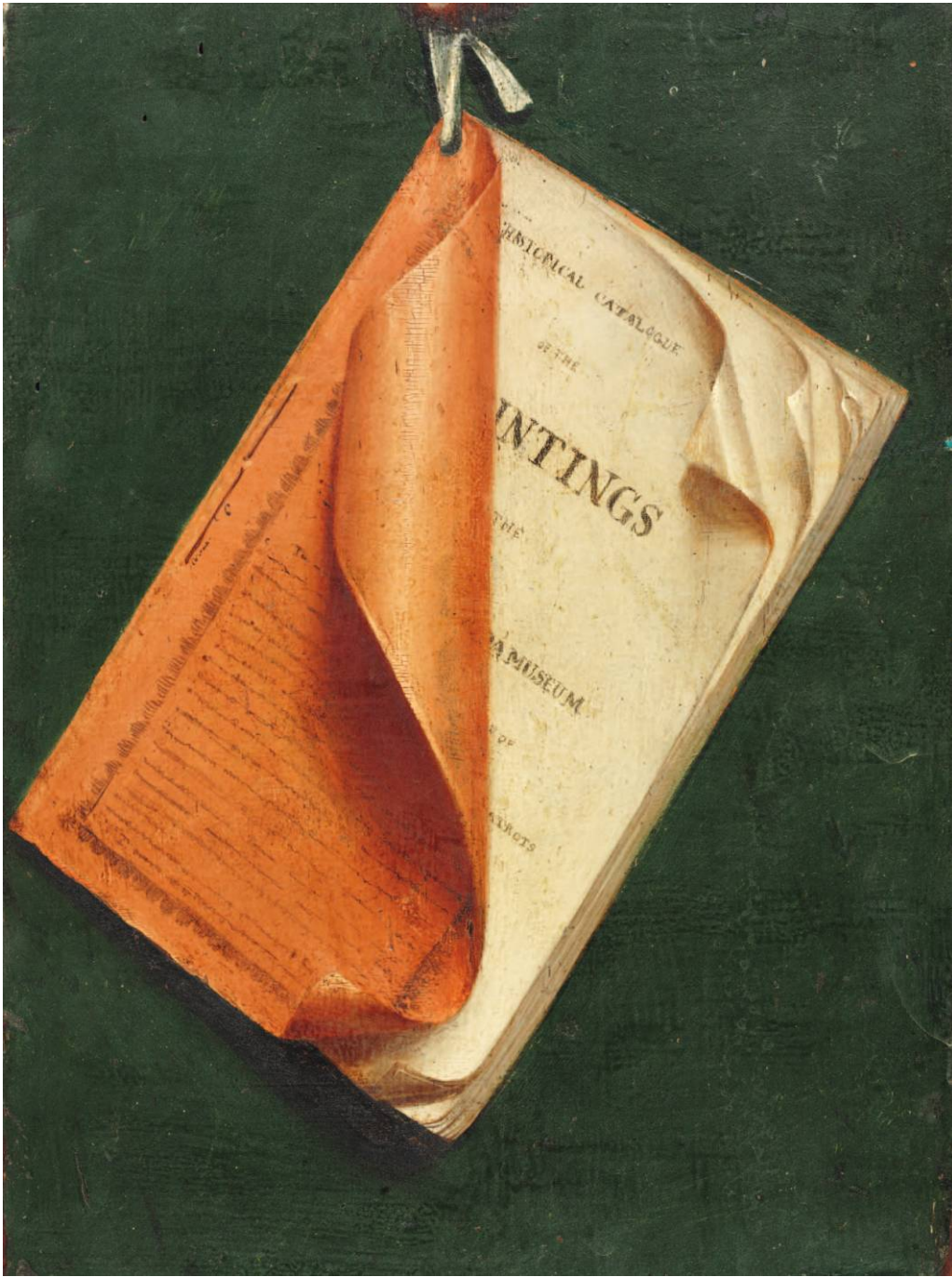


Fig. 22. Raphaelle Peale, *Catalogue Deception*, after 1813. Oil on wood; H. 12⁷/₈" , W. 9³/₈". (On loan to Philadelphia Museum of Art.)

Rising from the Sea—a Deception, Peale wryly pointed out the impossibility of rendering a nude decent enough to satisfy all viewers. Perhaps intentionally, his painting echoes a contemporaneous satirical print by the English illustrator George Cruikshank (fig. 25). In "Making Decent!! A Hint to the Society for the Suppression of Vice," Cruikshank depicted

the censorious English social activist William Wilberforce using his black stovepipe hat to cover (and thus unintentionally enhance) the genitals of Sir Richard Westmacott's colossal statue of Achilles in Hyde Park, London.

Like Wilberforce's phallic hat, the trompe l'oeil cloth in *Venus Rising from the Sea—a Deception* makes



Fig. 23. Raphaelle Peale, *Fruitpiece with Peaches Covered by a Handkerchief (A Covered Painting—Peaches)*, ca. 1819. Oil on panel; H. 12½", W. 18". (Private collection.)

Peale's joke even more pointed. It is not a napkin—as it has often been described—but a kerchief, a common garment that men wore around their necks and women tucked demurely into their bodices.⁵⁴ In the early nineteenth century, when clean laundry was a luxury, a tidy, pressed white kerchief communicated both affluence and bourgeois propriety.⁵⁵ Yet kerchiefs were also intimate garments

⁵⁴ In the 1947 edition of Peale's biography, Peale's distant relative Charles Coleman Sellers claimed that the painter had created his Venus as a practical joke aimed at his wife, Martha. Although Sellers was right to perceive the prankish humor in Peale's painting, he misidentified the *trompe l'oeil* cloth, claiming it was one of Martha's "best linen napkins." Charles Coleman Sellers, *Charles Willson Peale*, vol. 2, *Later Life, 1790–1827* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1947), 390. In the 1969 edition, Sellers attributes this family anecdote to Raphaelle's descendant Harry Peale Haldt; see Sellers, *Charles Willson Peale*, 420, 482 n. 5. An early nineteenth-century napkin would not have had a striped, woven border, such as the one Peale depicted. This feature was, however, common on kerchiefs, as were the square creases, formed by pressing the kerchief while it was folded, which also appear in *Venus Rising from the Sea—a Deception*. We are grateful to Linda Eaton, curator of textiles, Winterthur Museum, for her identification of this object. See Linda Eaton, e-mail message to Lauren Lessing, June 8, 2005, Nelson-Atkins Museum curatorial files.

⁵⁵ Lower-class men and women generally wore kerchiefs that had been printed or dyed to hide dirt and stains. Only the well-to-do wore white kerchiefs. See Paolo Peri, *The Handkerchief* (Modena: Zanfi, 1992), 20–21; and Merideth Wright, *Everyday Dress of Rural America, 1783–1800* (New York: Dover, 1992), 53–54.

worn next to the body and thus suggested warm, desirable flesh. For this reason, the early nineteenth-century English poet William Sidney Walker could declare in a love sonnet, "My heart leapt in me, as with swimming eye / I gazed upon that glossy kerchief white, / And the fair neck it shaded—'twas a sight / To steep a poet in fine phantasy."⁵⁶ Charles Willson Peale similarly exploited the erotic associations of kerchiefs in his 1788 portrait of Benjamin and Eleanor Ridgely Laming, in which a kerchief spills over Benjamin's thigh and onto Eleanor's skirt, symbolizing the couple's amorous union (fig. 26). An early nineteenth-century watercolor by a self-taught American artist, now in the New-York Historical Society, similarly depicts two lovers seated in a grove by a shore, connected by the white kerchief they both hold (fig. 27). The woman's exposed bosom, on which her lover's gaze rests, suggests that the kerchief she offers him is still warm from her body. By showing the goddess of erotic love preemptively covered with an object that is itself erotic, Peale made his painting even more absurd. His painted illusion furthermore suggests,

⁵⁶ William Sidney Walker, "The Silk Handkerchief," reprinted in *The Poetical Remains of William Sydney Walker*, ed. J. Moultrie (London: Parker, 1852), 154.



Fig. 24. Valentine Green after James Barry, *The Birth of Venus*, 1772. Mezzotint; H. 24 $\frac{1}{16}$ " , W. 15 $\frac{3}{8}$ ". (Ackland Art Museum, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, William A. Whitaker Foundation Art Fund.)

at least initially, that some foolish person has hastily uncovered his or her own actual flesh in order to cover the painted flesh of Barry's *Venus*.

Raphaelle Peale's painting is also a jab—albeit a veiled one—aimed at his father, with whom he had a famously contentious relationship. As Carol Soltis has shown, Charles Willson Peale had painted at least one nude woman himself as a young man but nevertheless threw himself behind nineteenth-century efforts to keep nudes out of sight.⁵⁷ In an 1805 letter to the architect Benjamin Henry Latrobe, he wrote, "such subjects may be good to shew Artists talents, but in my opinion not very proper for public exhibition—I like no art which

⁵⁷ Soltis, "In Sympathy with the Heart," 290–349. Charles Willson Peale painted a nude Venus (now lost) in 1776. Miller, *Selected Papers of Charles Willson Peale and His Family*, 2:834 n. 2.

can raise a blush on a lady's cheek."⁵⁸ Writing to Thomas Jefferson in 1811, he claimed that he had ordered "pictures of Nudities" to be "put out of sight" at a recent exhibition of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.⁵⁹ This campaign of censorship became personal in 1815, when Raphaelle's younger brother Rembrandt exhibited his nude painting *Jupiter and Io* (now destroyed) over his father's strenuous objections.⁶⁰ Two years later, Charles Willson Peale wrote, "We ought to keep all such pictures out of sight, if we wish to preserve the modesty of our females."⁶¹ Yet, even as Raphaelle Peale poked fun at his father and other prim Philadelphians for their censorship of nudity in art, he must have been aware of his own self-censorship in *Venus Rising from the Sea—a Deception*. For, as we now know, the painting is itself a kind of veil, painted by Peale to cover his earlier composition.

What Then, Was the Nature of Peale's First Joke—the Joke He Decided Not to Tell?

It, too, was centered on his troubled relationship with his father. Although Charles Willson Peale loved his eldest son, he was deeply disappointed in him, and he expressed this disappointment in letters to family members written over the course of many years.⁶² The elder Peale complained that "the painting of objects that have no motion" was a skill that "any person of tolerable genius may acquire," and he was well aware that Raphaelle's choice to stop painting portraits in favor of still lifes had lowered his status as a professional artist.⁶³ He

⁵⁸ Miller, *Selected Papers of Charles Willson Peale and His Family*, 2:834.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 3:117–18.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 3:330–31. As Soltis has revealed, Rembrandt painted over parts of his composition, retitling it more vaguely *The Dream of Love*, in order to appease his father. The painting remained controversial when it was exhibited in Boston in 1822, however. Soltis correctly points out that *Venus Rising from the Sea—a Deception*, likely painted the same year as this debacle, might also poke fun at Raphaelle's brother Rembrandt, who covered portions of his own nude by repainting it. Soltis, "In Sympathy with the Heart," 333–35.

⁶¹ Miller, *Selected Papers of Charles Willson Peale and His Family*, 3:499.

⁶² Sources of biographical information about Raphaelle Peale include Nemerov, *Body of Raphaelle Peale*; Ward and Hart, "Subversion and Illusion"; Miller, "Father and Son"; Cikovsky, Bantel, and Wilmerding, *Raphaelle Peale Still Lifes*; Lloyd, "Philadelphia Story"; and Sellers, *Charles Willson Peale* (1969 ed.).

⁶³ "The Autobiography of Charles Willson Peale," MS, Peale-Sellers Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, 337. Cited in Brandon Fortune, "A Delicate Balance: Raphaelle Peale's Still Life Paintings and the Ideal of Temperance," in *The Peale Family: Creation of a Legacy, 1770–1870*, ed. Lillian B. Miller,



Fig. 25. George Cruikshank, "Making Decent!! A Hint to the Society for the Suppression of Vice," published by G. Humphrey, London, 1822. Print with hand coloring; H. 10", W. 8½". (Grunwald Center for the Graphic Arts, UCLA Hammer Museum.)

also attributed his son's frequent, heavy drinking to a simple lack of self-discipline—a failing that, in his opinion, had also impoverished Raphaelle and caused his recurrent bouts of a mysterious, debilitating illness. He admonished his son in 1817 to

exhibit catalog (New York: Abbeville, in association with the Trust for Museum Exhibitions and the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, 1996), 138.

"act the man" and take control of his life.⁶⁴ In 1818 he wrote to Raphaelle, "If you suffer do you not know that you are deserving of pain?"⁶⁵ Three

⁶⁴ Charles Willson Peale to Raphaelle Peale, November 15, 1817, in Miller, *Selected Papers of Charles Willson Peale and His Family*, 3:54⁸.

⁶⁵ Charles Willson Peale to Raphaelle Peale, March 1, 1818, in *ibid.*, 3:580.



Fig. 26. Charles Willson Peale, *Benjamin and Eleanor Ridgely Laming*, 1788. Oil on canvas; H. 41 $\frac{3}{4}$ " , W. 60 $\frac{1}{16}$ " . (National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, gift of Morris Schapiro; photo, Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art.)

months after receiving this letter, the younger Peale threatened suicide.⁶⁶

In light of his strained familial relations, Raphaëlle Peale's initial decision to base his visual joke upon his father's portrait of himself is significant. As Pheobe Lloyd has noted, the circumstances surrounding the painting of this portrait were fraught. On the same day that Charles Willson Peale wrote to Raphaëlle, inviting him to sit for the long-promised portrait, he also wrote to his younger son Rubens, noting that he intended this painting as a "lesson . . . to help [Raphaëlle] with his coloring."⁶⁷ On the one hand, the elder Peale's portrait of Raphaëlle depicts him as a confident professional artist, in command of his tools. On the other hand, as his letter to Rubens makes clear, Charles Willson Peale could not resist turning this portrait

into an object lesson. It was, in essence, a painted version of his many admonishments to Raphaëlle, urging him to become a better artist and a better man. It is hardly surprising, then, that the younger Peale would have wanted to "cover" the portrait.

For his first composition, Peale chose a canvas similar in size to his father's portrait of him. As we now know, he first painted the hanging kerchief. Then, probably with the portrait in front of him, he began to paint a partial copy of it around the edges of the kerchief—his own arm and hand holding brushes and palette, the back of a chair, and, at the upper right, a framed still life, all rendered in thin washes of paint. Had he completed this first version of his composition, the trompe l'oeil kerchief would have seemed to cover most of the portrait, revealing just enough to make it recognizable to Peale's original intended audience—presumably members of his own family. In particular, Peale may have hoped to trick his father into reaching out and attempting to pull the kerchief away from what he believed to be his own painting. Such a deception would have made Charles Willson Peale,

⁶⁶ Although the suicide note, which Raphaëlle wrote to his wife, is lost, Charles Willson Peale's reaction is recorded in a letter to his son dated June 26, 1818. He wrote, "But I fear, Raphaëlle, that you are not right, I am led to think so by seeing the word Suecide in your letter" (ibid., 3:593).

⁶⁷ Lloyd, "Philadelphia Story," 164.



Fig. 27. *Seated Couple and Dog in an Idyllic Landscape*, ca. 1790s. Watercolor and graphite on pierced paper; H. 14¼", W. 16¼". (New-York Historical Society, inv. 1200.)

at least momentarily, into a foolish figure—the butt of his son's joke.⁶⁸ As Dorinda Evans has noted, Peale's painting also recalls a story, related by the Elder Pliny, of a contest between the ancient Greek painters Zeuxis and Parrhasius. Zeuxis produced a trompe l'oeil painting of grapes so convincing that it fooled the birds. Parrhasius, however, defeated his rival by painting "such a realistic picture of a curtain

that Zeuxis, proud of the verdict of the birds, requested that the curtain should now be drawn and the picture displayed."⁶⁹ The Peale family's letters show that they knew this story.⁷⁰ With his own painted drapery, Raphaelle Peale likely hoped to prove, like Parrhasius, that he was the better painter.

However satisfying such a deception might have been, Raphaelle Peale probably intended it to be fleeting. Lloyd, who perceived the ghostly forms in the background of *Venus Rising from the Sea—a Deception* but failed to recognize them as pentimenti,

⁶⁸ For the popularity of humor at others' expense in the eighteenth century, see Gatrell, *City of Laughter*; and Simon Dickie, "Hilarity and Pitilessness in the Mid-Eighteenth Century: English Jestbook Humor," *Eighteenth Century Studies* 37, no. 1 (2003): 1–22. Practical joking was a popular eighteenth-century form of humor that survived (perhaps with particular vigor in the Peale family) into the nineteenth century.

⁶⁹ Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 35:308–11.

⁷⁰ Evans, "Raphaelle Peale's *Venus Rising from the Sea*."

observed correctly that the still life in the upper-right corner of Raphaelle Peale's painting differs from the still life in the same area of his father's portrait.⁷¹ Charles Willson Peale made no effort to copy his son's compositional style in this painting-within-a-painting. He showed instead a tumbled pile of fruit that more closely resembles a still life by his brother, James Peale. In his partial copy, however, Raphaelle Peale reduced the still life to a single piece of fruit, rendering it more clearly recognizable as his own work but, at the same time, subtly giving away his prank. After all, it would only have been after the initial deception was revealed that members of the Peale family could have understood another layer of humor imbedded in the image: in Raphaelle Peale's original composition, the trompe l'oeil kerchief, representative of his chosen genre of still life painting, trumps the portrait it seems to cover, representative of his father's and brother Rembrandt's more celebrated field of portraiture.⁷²

Peale's first joke also has darker dimensions. In Christian iconography, the image of a linen cloth hanging parallel to the picture plane denotes Saint Veronica's veil—also known as the Sudarium. Drawn from the apocryphal gospel of Nicodemus, the legend of Saint Veronica tells of a miraculous image of Christ's face appearing on the saint's linen head covering after she used it to wipe away the sweat and blood from Jesus's face as he carried the cross to Calvary. During the Renaissance, Veronica was commonly depicted holding her veil before her, but baroque artists favored trompe l'oeil images of the cloth alone, often dramatically lit and sometimes partially concealing the instruments of Christ's passion (fig. 28). In Peale's first version of his painting, his face seemed to be concealed behind the kerchief in exactly the location where one would expect to find the face of the suffering Christ.

It is possible that Peale saw one of many paintings of the Sudarium by the seventeenth-century Spanish painter Francisco de Zurbarán, or a member of his circle, during his travels in South America and Mexico, where he journeyed gathering animal specimens for the Peale Museum in 1793 and 1794.⁷³ Small, votive paintings, including images of the Sudarium, were popular export items to the Spanish colonies in the New World, and



Fig. 28. Francisco de Zurbarán, *The Veil of Saint Veronica*, 1630s. Oil on canvas; H. 42¼", W. 31¼". (Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation, Houston.)

Zurbarán himself had exported over a hundred such pictures—many now unlocated—to the Americas between 1647 and 1649 alone.⁷⁴ Peale's penchant for seventeenth-century Spanish still lifes is evident in his own elegant still life compositions, which resemble Spanish *bodegón* paintings of food items arranged on shallow ledges in raking light.⁷⁵ Zurbarán's similarly spare arrangements and chiaroscuro lighting would surely have appealed to him. Significantly, it was shortly after his return from Mexico that Peale exhibited two trompe l'oeil

⁷¹ Lloyd, "Philadelphia Story," 165–66.

⁷² Margaret C. Conrads provided this insight during work on the catalog essay.

⁷³ For Raphaelle Peale's journey abroad, see Miller, *Selected Papers of Charles Willson Peale and His Family*, 2:24, 73–74, 78–79.

⁷⁴ Duncan T. Kinkead, "The Last Sevillian Period of Francisco de Zurbarán," *Art Bulletin* 65 (June 1983): 307. Votive images of Veronica's veil were (and are) popular in Latin America. Creators of Mexican folk paintings, from the early nineteenth century to the present, have followed baroque conventions in their depiction of this subject. See Elizabeth Netto Calil Zarur and Charles Muir Lovell, eds., *Art and Faith in Mexico: The Nineteenth-Century Retablo Tradition*, exhibit catalog (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2001), 126–31, 310.

⁷⁵ Lloyd, "Philadelphia Story," 158; Cikovsky, Bantel, and Wilmerding, *Raphaelle Peale Still Lifes*, 50; and William H. Gerdts, *Painters of the Humble Truth: Masterpieces of American Still Life, 1801–1939* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press), 53–55.



Fig. 29. Claude Mellan, *The Sudarium of Saint Veronica*, 1649. Print. (New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations, Print Collection, Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints, and Photographs.)



Fig. 30. Nicolas (Montagne) Plattenberg after Phillippe de Champagne, *La sainte Face*, 1654. Etching with copper engraving; H. 17 $\frac{3}{4}$ ", W. 13 $\frac{3}{4}$ ". (Galerie Bassenge, November 29, 2002 auction, lot 5222, *Ausgewählte Graphik* [selected prints].)

"covered pictures" (both now lost) in the 1795 Columbianum Exhibition in Philadelphia.⁷⁶

It is likely that Peale also saw printed images of Veronica's veil closer to home. One such print, an engraving by the French artist Claude Mellan, was exhibited at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in 1812 (fig. 29).⁷⁷ Other prints, in which the Sudarium even more closely resembles the hanging cloth in *Venus Rising from the Sea—a Deception*, include engravings by Jacques Alix and Nicolas Plattenberg after paintings by Phillippe de Champagne who, like Zurbarán, painted Veronica's veil repeatedly (fig. 30). Print collections in the United States in the early nineteenth century are not well documented; however, the Peale family owned one such collection themselves, and through their social and political connections, they had easy access to many others. For example, the sizable and par-

tially undocumented art trove of Joseph Bonaparte, the former king of Spain, lay just across the river from Philadelphia in Bordentown, New Jersey.⁷⁸ Charles Willson Peale painted Bonaparte's portrait in 1824, and the Peales must have known his art collection well. It seems at least possible, if not likely, that Peale and his family would have seen engravings such as these. In any case, the familiarity with which educated Americans regarded images of the Sudarium is indicated by Benjamin Franklin, who referred casually in his autobiography to "a picture of St. Veronika displaying her handkerchief," which he saw in a London boarding house.⁷⁹ Had Peale completed and exhibited his first composition for *Venus Rising from the Sea—a*

⁷⁶ See Gerdt, *Painters of the Humble Truth*, 51 n. 8.

⁷⁷ The catalog entry for this print reads, "The Sudarium of Saint Veronica, Holy Handkerchief, C. Mellan" (*Second Annual Exhibition of the Society of Artists of the United States and the Pennsylvania Academy*, exhibit catalog [Philadelphia: Palmer, 1812], 9).

⁷⁸ See Patricia Tyson Stroud, *The Man Who Had Been King: The American Exile of Napoleon's Brother Joseph* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006). Although Stroud found no record of a depiction of the Sudarium in extant sale records of Bonaparte's estate, these records do not represent a complete inventory of his extensive art collection. E-mail from Stroud to Lauren Lessing, April 18, 2007.

⁷⁹ Benjamin Franklin, *The Life of Dr. Benjamin Franklin, Written by Himself* (Salem, [MA]: Cushing & Carlton, 1796), 56.

Deception, erudite members of his audience—including his own family—would have understood his reference to Veronica’s “handkerchief.”

Both Phoebe Lloyd and Alexander Nemerov noted the similarity between the hanging trompe l’oeil cloth in *Venus Rising from the Sea—a Deception* and baroque paintings of Veronica’s veil.⁸⁰ Unaware of the precise nature of Raphaelle Peale’s initial, aborted composition underlying the perimeters of *Venus Rising from the Sea—a Deception*, however, they understandably missed the true significance of the artist’s quotation from earlier images of the Sudarium. “The shining white surface is devoid of a face,” wrote Lloyd, and Nemerov interpreted this “dramatic indicator of silence” as an act of self-negation by the artist.⁸¹ In fact Peale, who was very ill and probably knew that he was dying by 1822, initially painted his hanging cloth, with its associated reference to Christ’s passion, as a grim joke about his own suffering and imminent demise. Far from indicating passive silence and surrender in the face of death, Peale’s gallows humor was almost certainly intended to deliver a stinging rebuke to his father and possibly the rest of his family as well.

Since 1798, Peale had experienced frequent and progressively severe attacks of an illness that affected his stomach and hands. During these attacks he was unable to paint and suffered crippling pain. Although he worked diligently during his periods of remission, he was unable to earn a living and was forced to rely on his wife and father for financial support. The Peale family believed Raphaelle’s physical suffering was the result of his frequent, heavy drinking and gout; however, there is convincing evidence that suggests his condition stemmed, at least in part, from his exposure to the heavy metals used as preservatives in the elder Peale’s museum.⁸² In his role as a taxidermist, Peale

treated animal carcasses extensively with arsenic and mercury compounds before stuffing and mounting them. As a finishing touch, he dusted their pelts with arsenic powder to repel insects. The few Peale Museum specimens that survive today are likely to contain these pesticides, and museum professionals must follow rigorous safety procedures to carefully identify, store, and handle such contaminated objects.⁸³ A nephew of Raphaelle Peale, Escol Sellers, who witnessed his death in 1825, later reported that he died from necrosis of the jaw—a common symptom (along with joint and gastrointestinal pain) of heavy metal poisoning.⁸⁴ Significantly, Charles Coleman Sellers reported that Raphaelle Peale himself believed that his “gout” was caused by his work in his father’s museum.⁸⁵ Peale was understandably bitter about this point and about what he perceived to be his father’s preferential treatment of his brother Rembrandt.⁸⁶

No doubt, Charles Willson Peale’s refusal to acknowledge the fact that Raphaelle’s illness was beyond either his or his son’s ability to remedy, and might ultimately prove fatal, also rankled. As several scholars have recently shown, the elder Peale was anxious to conceal a range of disturbing sights. These included not only nudes but also *lusus naturae*—literally “freaks of nature”—which,

with arsenic poisoning in 1790 but that following treatment with castor oil, sulfur, and soapy water, “was wholly relieved” of his illness (Miller, *Selected Papers of Charles Willson Peale and His Family*, 5:140). Recently, the psychologist Kay Redfield Jamison has suggested that Peale’s illness may have resulted from manic depression. It is worth noting, however, that radical mood swings are also a common symptom of mercury poisoning. See Jamison, *Touched with Fire: Manic-Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 265–70.

⁸³ Proper handling of contaminated materials involves gloves, protective apron, and a fit-tested respirator with HEPA filters. Identification and safe handling procedures are outlined in the National Park Service publication “Arsenic Health and Safety Update,” *Conserve O Gram*, nos. 2/3 (September 2000), <http://www.nps.gov/history/museum/publications/conservoogram/02-03.pdf> (accessed March 6, 2009). For additional information on pesticides in ethnographic collections, see Nancy Odegaard and Alyce Sadongei, *Old Poisons, New Problems: A Museum Resource for Managing Contaminated Cultural Materials* (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira, 2005).

⁸⁴ George Escol Sellers, memoirs MS, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia. Quoted extensively in Lloyd, “Philadelphia Story,” 168–69, 195–200. Sellers cited gangrene as the immediate cause of Peale’s death, but he also noted that the bones of his uncle’s upper jaw had begun to deteriorate years earlier.

⁸⁵ Sellers, *Charles Willson Peale*, 2:338 (1947 ed.).

⁸⁶ In a letter to Rembrandt Peale dated July 27, 1812, Charles Willson Peale addressed Raphaelle’s resentment of Rembrandt’s more favored treatment at his father’s hands. Charles Willson attributed Raphaelle’s jealousy to his “deranged state” and commented that his marked attention to Rembrandt was “my pleasure, which none of my children have any right to control” (Cikovsky, Bantel, and Wilmerding, *Raphaelle Peale Still Lifes*, 100).

⁸⁰ Ibid., 165; Nemerov, *Body of Raphaelle Peale*, 70–74.

⁸¹ Lloyd, “Philadelphia Story,” 165; Nemerov, *Body of Raphaelle Peale*, 70–74.

⁸² Phoebe Lloyd has demonstrated that Peale’s symptoms are indicative of chronic heavy metal poisoning, which he may have developed through extended periods of exposure to toxins used as preservatives in the Peale Museum. Lloyd and Gordon Bendersky, “Arsenic, an Old Case: The Chronic Heavy Metal Poisoning of Raphaelle Peale, 1774–1825,” *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* 36 (Summer 1993): 654–65. The extent of Raphaelle’s work in the museum and, thus, the cause of his illness is a controversial subject among Peale scholars. Although Lloyd and Bendersky are probably correct that Peale suffered from heavy metal poisoning, their assertion that Charles Willson Peale intentionally allowed his son to be poisoned has little merit. Although the elder Peale understood the danger of acute heavy metal poisoning, he simply did not fully grasp the chronic and progressive nature of this affliction. Thus, he could recall in his autobiography that Raphaelle fell seriously ill

Peale noted in a 1792 broadside for his museum, "are not always agreeable to the sight."⁸⁷ Thus, in his museum, he exhibited both his portrait of a man disfigured by scars and the stuffed carcass of a deformed, five-legged cow behind drapes.⁸⁸ Charles Willson Peale also draped another exhibit in his museum, his own painting of his first wife Rachel Brewer Peale (Raphaelle's mother) weeping over the body of their fourth child (Raphaelle's sister Margaret) who had died in infancy (fig. 31).⁸⁹ The label that the elder Peale wrote and pinned to the curtain covering this portrait read:

Draw not the curtain, if a tear
Just trembling in a parent's eye
Can fill your gentle soul with fear
Or arouse your tender heart to sigh.

A child lies dead before your eyes
And seems no more than molded clay
While the affected mother cries
And constant mourns from day to day.⁹⁰

Significantly, by 1818 Charles Willson Peale had decided not to exhibit this painting at all. The elder Peale's desire to hide from view those sights that did not jibe with his Enlightenment-era vision of a just and orderly universe stands in marked contrast to his own self-presentation as a revealer of truth. For instance, in his self-portrait, *The Artist in His Museum* (1823, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts), Peale depicted himself drawing away a heavy velvet curtain to reveal the wonders of his

carefully arranged collection. In his initial composition for *Venus Rising from the Sea—a Deception*, Raphaelle Peale shrouded his father's portrait of himself in a way that satirized the elder Peale's self-imposed blindness, even as it seemed to ask, poignantly, "Father, why have you forsaken me?"

Why, one might ask, did Peale abandon this earlier version of his painting before it was complete? There are several possible reasons. Peale was desperately in need of money in the early 1820s, and he might have abandoned the composition because it was too personal to be commercially appealing.⁹¹ Second, the artist may have ultimately shied away from so overtly wounding his father, whom he loved and depended upon for financial support. Peale's self-censorship suggests his awareness that his joke had simply gone too far, overwhelming mirth with melancholy. The harsh, satirical edge of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century humor, which commonly poked vicious fun at the private lives of particular men and women, was growing softer in the 1820s.⁹² As new middle-class standards of decorum gained ascendance, humorous prints and prose began to adhere to rules of politeness that militated against cruelty. By altering his painting before it was complete, Peale rendered it more lighthearted, less obviously self-referential, and more broadly appealing.⁹³ Still, he surely would have enjoyed the fact that, after so many years, his first composition would surprisingly and dramatically surface, like a finger in a pie.

The evolution of *Venus Rising from the Sea—a Deception* shows how Raphaelle Peale negotiated the limits of humor in the transitional period of the 1820s. He rejected his earlier composition that had, as its theme, the dirty laundry of the Peale family quarrels. Yet the joke he did tell, with its trickery, erotic connotations, and implicit criticism of American prudishness, remains rooted in the satirical and bawdy humor of the eighteenth century. In 1842 *Venus Rising from the Sea—a Deception* was purchased, along with the entire New York

⁸⁷ Peale's 1792 broadside, titled "My Design in Forming This Museum," is cited in David C. Ward, *Charles Willson Peale: Art and Selfhood in the Early Republic* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 226 n. 5.

⁸⁸ As David Brigham notes, these display methods served both to uphold standards of public decency and to arouse popular interest by adding drama and excitement. See Brigham, *Public Culture in the Early Republic: Peale's Museum and Its Audience* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1995), 147.

⁸⁹ Alexander Nemerov has connected the cloth concealing Venus in Raphaelle Peale's painting to the cloth concealing this portrait in Charles Willson's museum. See Nemerov, *Body of Raphaelle Peale*, 191. Nevertheless, his ignorance of Raphaelle Peale's underlying composition prevented him from understanding the true significance of this comparison.

⁹⁰ See Phoebe Lloyd, "A Death in the Family," *Philadelphia Museum of Art Bulletin* 78 (Spring 1982): 7. More recently, Edward Schwarzschild has argued that Charles Willson Peale's decision to drape his portrait in this way was symptomatic of his lifelong struggle to contain and control death. Schwarzschild, "From the Physiognotrace to the Kinematoscope: Visual Technology and the Preservation of the Peale family," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 12, no. 1 (1999): 57–59. This view of Charles Willson Peale as locked in a battle against death is also held by Susan Stewart. See Stewart, "Death and Life, in That Order, in the Works of Charles Willson Peale," in *The Cultures of Collecting*, ed. John Elsner and Roger Cardinal (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 204–23.

⁹¹ Peale, who apparently owned property in Maryland, is listed in a Baltimore newspaper in 1821 as owing two years of back property taxes. See "A List of Persons," *Baltimore Republican Star and General Advertiser*, March 10, 1821, 4.

⁹² Gatrell, *City of Laughter*, 435–82.

⁹³ This interpretation directly contradicts Alexander Nemerov, who described *Venus Rising from the Sea—a Deception* in its present state as a monstrous image about death and the dissolution of the body. In fact, the painting as we now see it represents Peale's attempt to move beyond such gothic subjects. Nemerov, *Body of Raphaelle Peale*, 70–74, 189–201.



Fig. 31. Charles Willson Peale, *Rachel Weeping*, 1772. Oil on canvas; H. 36¹³/₁₆" , W. 32¹/₁₆". (Philadelphia Museum of Art, gift of the Barra Foundation, 1977.)

Peale Museum collection, by the prince of humbug himself, the American showman and museum owner P. T. Barnum.⁹⁴ Although Peale's painting

⁹⁴ Barnum acquired the entire collection of Peale's New York museum in December, 1842, and added most of it to his own museum collection. The fact that *Venus Rising from the Sea—a Deception* surfaced in Bridgeport, CT, where Barnum lived, suggests that he took this particular painting home. The Barnum Museum in Bridgeport has no record of its ever having been displayed publicly by Barnum. For Barnum's efforts to render his own museum

must have delighted him, Barnum chose not to display it publicly. At the time, he was working hard to portray his own New York museum as a morally instructive institution, where ladies and children might wander unattended. Barnum did display nudes in his collection, including a marble copy of the Italian sculptor Antonio Canova's figure *Venus*

respectable, see "Barnum's American Museum," *Hudson River Chronicle*, July 30, 1850, 3.

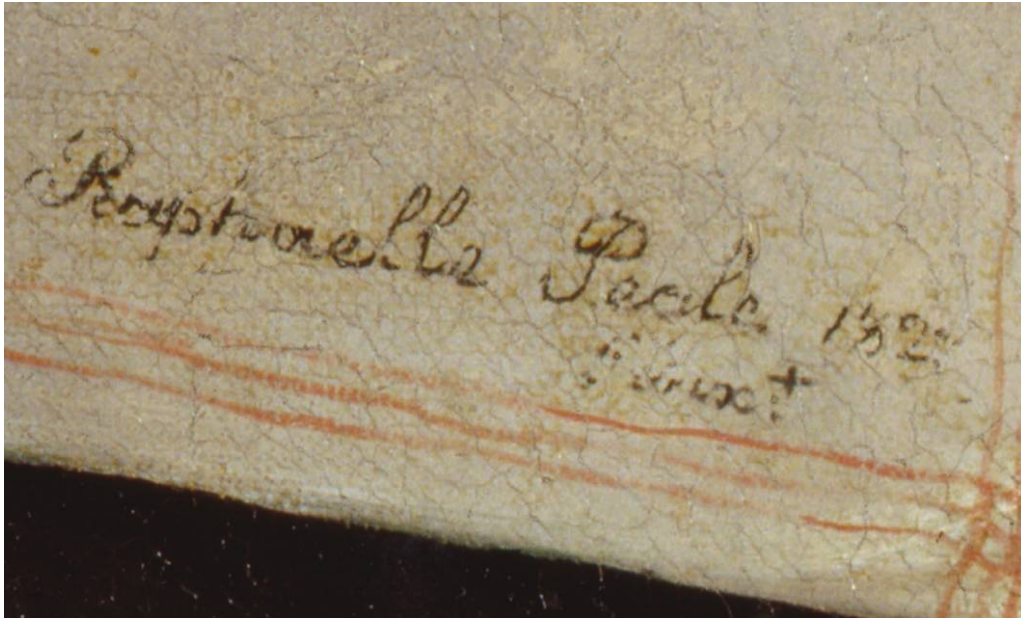


Fig. 32. Detail of painting in fig. 1 showing the signature and date.

Italica; however, these works were rendered palatable by associated sentimental texts that idealized them and stressed both their innocence and their credentials as highbrow art.⁹⁵ Peale's irreverent treatment of nudity and eroticism, which cut against the grain of mid-nineteenth-century sentimental culture, simply could not be framed in this way and thus could not find a place in Barnum's museum collection.

A Final Question Concerning the Date

Critics and scholars who have written about Raphaelle Peale's *Venus Rising from the Sea—a Deception* in the eighty years since its rediscovery have struggled with incomplete and misleading information about the object itself. Through a thorough, collaborative investigation of Peale's painting as both a physical and intellectual entity, we have attempted to remedy this situation. A final question that the technical examination of Peale's *Venus* has helped us to resolve concerns the painting's date, which the artist inscribed next

to his name on the lower-right corner of the kerchief (fig. 32). A reporter who saw the painting in Edith Halpert's gallery shortly after its rediscovery noted, "The painting is signed in a clear, fine hand and dated 1823."⁹⁶ Indeed, early twentieth-century viewers were unanimous in this reading of Peale's date, the last digit of which is now so abraded that it is difficult to decipher. The date of 1823 was firmly enough attached to *After the Bath* (as the painting was then known) that, when Dorinda Evans identified it as *Venus Rising from the Sea—a Deception*—a painting Peale had exhibited in 1822—William Gerdts strenuously disagreed with her.⁹⁷ He asserted that, as the painting was dated 1823, it must be a copy by Peale of the earlier trompe l'oeil *Venus*. As we now know, however, the pentimenti of *Venus Rising from the Sea—a Deception* reveal the evolution of Peale's ideas and confirm that the painting is not a copy but an original work. Furthermore, its theme leaves little doubt that Evans's identification is correct. Yet, traces of black paint evident under high magnification (fig. 33) suggest that the date may indeed read "1823."⁹⁸ Why would Peale have misdated his painting in this way?

⁹⁵ "The peculiarities of Canova as a statuary [*sic*] are exhibited in this little figure, the limbs being light and delicate, and the expression of the face innocent and childlike. This *Venus* is celebrated in all parts of the world, where art is appreciated, and by some critics has been pronounced superior to that of the Medici—an opinion in which we heartily concur." P. T. Barnum, *Barnum's American Museum Illustrated* (New York: [Van Norden & Leslie?], 1850), 5.

⁹⁶ "Gallery Finds Rare Canvas by Raphaelle [*sic*] Peale," *Springfield (MA) News*, December 10, 1931, 9.

⁹⁷ William H. Gerdts, "A Deception Unmasked: An Artist Uncovered," *American Art Journal* 18 (1986): 5–23.

⁹⁸ The photomicrograph in fig. 33 reveals that the final digit, like the preceding "2," begins with a loop that curves back over itself

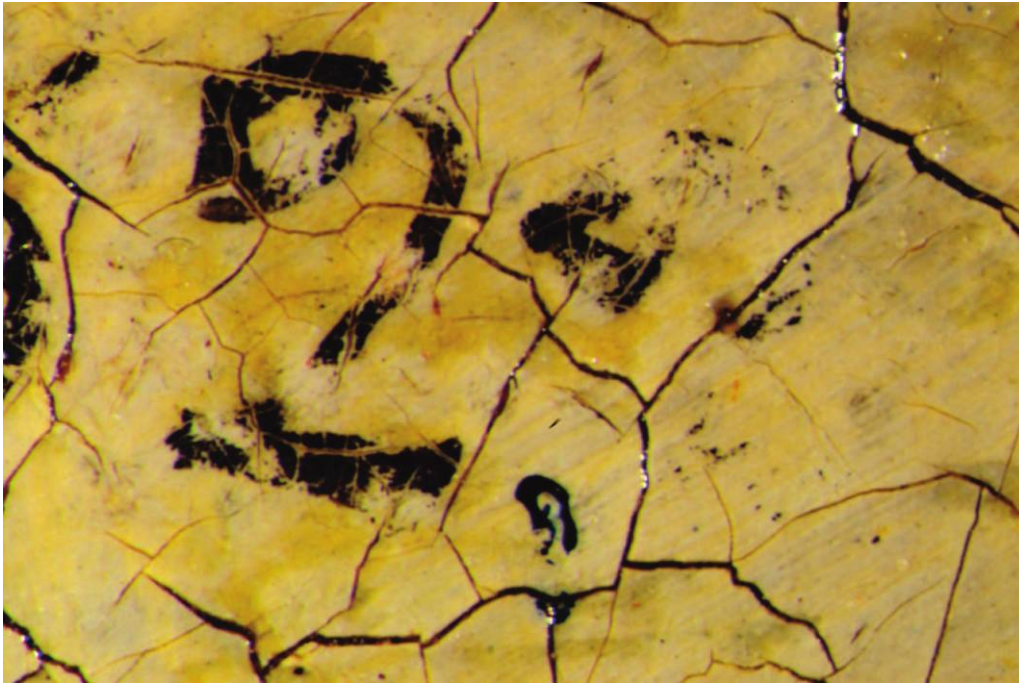


Fig. 33. Digital photomicrograph of painting in fig. 1 showing the last two digits of the date (the short vertical black stroke at bottom center is a later addition), 40 \times .

First, it is likely that Peale neither signed nor dated *Venus Rising from the Sea—a Deception* until after it was exhibited, first at the Pennsylvania Academy and later at Peale’s Baltimore Museum, in 1822. Although his inscription might appear, at first glance, to be a monogram stitched into the corner of the hanging kerchief, the signature—which reads “Raphaelle Peale, 1823 / Pinxt”—identifies the kerchief as a painted object and ultimately gives away the illusion. Peale may well have signed the painting only after it was acquired, in December 1822, by the Baltimore collector William Gilmore or perhaps even later after it was reacquired by his

before forming the upper arc of the number. Based on this upper arc and numbers from Raphaelle’s other signatures (see examples in Cikovsky, Bantel, and Wilmerding’s *Raphaelle Peale Still Lifes*), it is reasonable to eliminate the following possibilities: 1, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, or 0. Despite significant abrasion, a few tiny traces of black paint, visible under magnification (40 \times), indicate that the upper curve continues down toward the center, stops midway, and moves to the right with a slight downward angle. The slant of this last visible stroke might be indicative of a 3 when compared to the bottom stroke of the preceding 2. Finally, it is important to disregard the short vertical stroke on the lower left of the partial digit because it appears to be black restoration paint with a tinge of blue and a thicker, opaque character. The technical examination suggests two possibilities for this last digit. It is either a 3 that follows the controlled lettering of Raphaelle’s other numbers and concludes with a slightly lower final stroke (observed among a few of his other dates) or a compressed 2 positioned slightly higher than the preceding numbers.

brother Rubens Peale.⁹⁹ One explanation of why Raphaelle Peale would have given the painting a false date lies in the fact that, by early 1823, the artist was struggling to work. Although Charles Willson Peale related in letters from January and March of that year that Raphaelle was busy painting “fruit pieces,” his letter to Rubens Peale dated April 5, 1823, suggests that these attempts were unsuccessful. “Raphaelle being out of work is in need of support,” the elder Peale wrote, “he requests that you send to him the pictures remaining with you as soon as you may conveniently do it—as he must try to sell some or all of them by some means to get money to meet expenses.”¹⁰⁰ Although Peale continued to exhibit paintings during 1823 and 1824, it is impossible to know how many of these canvases had actually been painted years earlier. The

⁹⁹ Despite the fact that William Gilmore purchased the painting for \$25 in 1822, it was in the collection of the Peale Museum in New York (an institution owned and managed by Raphaelle’s brother Rubens) a short three years later. The fact that Rubens Peale apparently repurchased *Venus Rising from the Sea—a Deception* from its first owner suggests that members of the family may have recognized the personal themes the painting expressed. See Miller, *Selected Papers of Charles Willson Peale and His Family*, 4:207; and *Catalogue of the Paintings* (New York: Peale’s New York Museum and Gallery of the Fine Arts, ca. 1825), 7.

¹⁰⁰ Charles Willson Peale to Rubens Peale, April 5, 1823, cited in Cikovsky, Bantel, and Wilmerding, *Raphaelle Peale Still Lifes*, 112.

Nelson-Atkins canvas, which is likely one of Peale's last finished works, is the only extant painting by him that may bear a date as late as 1823. Seriously ill and sinking ever lower into poverty during the last years of his life, Peale may have misdated *Venus*

Rising from the Sea—a Deception through simple carelessness or in an attempt to imaginatively extend the length of his career. Seen in this light, Peale's painted date constitutes yet another layer of deception in his complex, elusive painting.

