

- (1939), in Greenberg, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965), pp. 3–4, 8.
61. *Ibid.*, pp. 9, 10, 11.
62. *Ibid.*, pp. 19, 21.
63. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. G. S. Noerr, trans. E. Jephcott (1947; rpt. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2002).
64. Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, p. 102. These critics were associated with the Institute for Social Research at the University of Frankfurt, which was established in 1923. It was disbanded after Hitler came to power in 1933 but continued in the United States and then Germany after the war.
65. F. R. Leavis, *Mass Civilization and Minority Culture* (Cambridge: Minority Press, 1930), pp. 3, 10; Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932; rpt. London: Chatto and Windus, 1978), p. 54. Both quoted in Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, p. 29.
66. Meyer Schapiro, “Public Use of Art,” *Art Front* 2 (November 1936): 4–6; quote on p. 4. Thomas Crow has also observed that Schapiro perceived overlaps between modernism and popular culture in his early work of the 1930s. Thomas Crow, “Modernism and Mass Culture in the Visual Arts,” in *Modern Art in the Common Culture* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1996), pp. 12–15.
67. Lewis Mumford, “Letters from Our Friends,” *Art Front* 1 (November 1934): n.p.
68. Patricia Johnston, *Real Fantasies: Edward Steichen’s Advertising Photography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 35–39.
69. Crow, “Modernism and Mass Culture,” pp. 33–34.
70. *Ibid.*, pp. 36–37.
71. Cullen, *The Art of Democracy*, p. 30.
72. *Ibid.*, p. 31.
73. Stuart Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing the Popular,” in *People’s History and Socialist Theory*, ed. Ralph Samuel (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), p. 238. Quoted in Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, p. 15.
74. Huyssen, “High/Low in an Expanded Field,” p. 369.

ONE

EDUCATING FOR DISTINCTION?

ART, HIERARCHY, AND CHARLES WILLSON PEALE’S *STAIRCASE GROUP*

DAVID STEINBERG

IN MAY 1795 a hundred-dollar prize awaited the victor of an essay contest inspired by the ongoing national conversation about education in the new republic. Sponsored by the American Philosophical Society held at Philadelphia for Promoting Useful Knowledge, the competition sought entries describing “the best system of liberal education, and literary instruction, adapted to the genius of the government, and best calculated to promote the general welfare of the United States.” Filled with expectations and concerns after acceptance of the federal constitution in 1788, citizens discussed the relationship of education to several interlocking sets of needs. One set centered on the novel experiment of a federal, republican (that is, representative) government. Americans recognized that to assure their country’s success, they must cultivate a virtuous, informed citizenry, possibly by allocating to common schools a role in preparing those with ability and virtue to lead. Yet promoting “the general welfare” made additional demands on education.¹

When considering this issue, historians have tended to identify only the broadest roles for the

fine arts among early national practices and ideas—that art should elevate one’s taste, for example, and that it should refine a person. The Philosophical Society’s specification of a system of “literary instruction” indicates a bias for the verbal over the visual that continues to inform analysis of the period. But Philosophical Society member, artist, and museum proprietor Charles Willson Peale (1741–1827) intended several of his paintings to teach citizens what he considered important lessons in living virtuous, fulfilling lives. He designed his now-famous *Staircase Group* with such a useful, educational initiative in mind (Fig. 1.1).

Coincidentally, the week after the Philosophical Society announced its contest, Peale’s painting debuted at a unique six-week exhibition in the Senate Chamber of the Pennsylvania State House, a building now known as Independence Hall. (Philadelphia was then the national capital, and the federal legislature met in the adjacent Congress Hall.) The show was organized by the Columbianum, the first professional artists’ association in the United States, which was founded earlier that year by Peale

FIGURE 1.1
Charles Willson Peale, *Staircase Group* (Portrait of Raphaëlle Peale and Titian Ramsay Peale), installed with modern door frame and step, 1795. Philadelphia Museum of Art, The George W. Elkins Collection.



and others. In addition to publicizing the group's aim and raising funds for its academy, the show provided Peale with the occasion to make and display the *Staircase Group*.² Anticipating the painting's potential for multiple uses from the outset, however, he also conceived it as a permanent installation for Peale's Museum, the collection of art, artifacts, and natural history specimens he had recently moved to the Philosophical Society's Philosophical Hall. After the Columbianum show closed, Peale reinstalled the painting and kept it on view for decades to come.³

Peale devised the *Staircase Group* to emphasize certain potentials of the new national situation and to reinforce a particular idea about how to approach the world. Significantly, he did so recognizing art's limited role in the United States—a country with few opportunities for teaching or fostering the sort of regulated improvisations that interpreting fine art required.⁴

This rarity affected Peale as much as anyone. He pursued many careers in his day and was self-taught in all but one, the trade of saddle making, in which he had apprenticed. He shared the general enthusiasm for diffusing aspects of the liberal arts curriculum long associated with society's elite, then known as the better sort. His own experience, however, emphasized what Joseph F. Kett has recently discussed as “the pursuit of knowledge under difficulties”—an approach to education that stood (and still stands) as a counterpart to uninterrupted, sequential schooling.⁵

Peale planned the *Staircase Group* for the early national situation. The way in which the painting taught accommodated autodidacts: it eased them step by step into “higher” approaches to its imagery. To begin, all one had to do was pay the not insubstantial entry fee of twenty-five cents to the Columbianum or to Peale's Museum. This question of money turns us toward another way that Peale crafted the painting with respect to circumstances. While sophisticated strategies for interpreting art had been associated only with better-sort observers, Peale intended the *Staircase Group* to cultivate such approaches among middling sorts. Yet for all that, what it offered was less a quasi-egalitarian experience than a new version of elitism.

SUCCESSIVE MODES OF ENGAGEMENT

George Washington, spying the *Staircase Group* in Peale's Museum, reportedly “bowed politely to the painted figures, which he afterwards acknowledged he thought were living persons.”⁶ Peale's son Rembrandt, who wrote this half a century after the event in question, makes a point similar to one that the elder Peale advanced in the 1820s when recalling that the painting “had long been admired for the deception produced.”⁷ These accounts capture a sense of the compelling illusion of reality the painting created—an effect that Peale enhanced with apparatus. So far as we know, a door frame (instead

of a picture frame) surrounded the canvas, a carpentered step lay on the floor below, and a riser flush with the wall abutted the painting's bottom edge. In this way, a mixed-media ensemble represented a rectangular stairwell articulated by a sequence of steps, one supporting a stray ticket to Peale's Museum and higher ones supporting Peale's eldest son, Raphaëlle, who was twenty-one in 1795. Another of Peale's sons, Titian, who was fifteen, leans into the space; he presumably stands on a still higher step and maintains balance with his right arm. The reminiscences by the Peales flatter the *Staircase Group* and attribute to the elder Peale a capacity to create perfect illusions.

Discussions of the *Staircase Group* by art historians have usually centered on this point,⁸ yet Raphaëlle's attributes indicate that Charles Willson Peale had additional intentions. Why has the young man brought a bundle of brushes and a palette set with different pigments onto a staircase? His mahlstick is similarly problematic. This device (whose name derives from the German *malen*, “to paint”) steadied the hand of an artist applying paint to an easel picture. A right-handed painter, like the one in Johannes Vermeer's *Art of Painting*, would hold the stick in his left hand, balance its far end along one of the picture's edges, and rest his brush-holding right hand on the stick's side. Raphaëlle's stick, held as if it were a climbing aid, is a visual pun, substituting one thing for another in a way that draws attention to their similarities.

As incongruous elements, Raphaëlle's brushes, palette, and mahlstick complicate the picture. As attributes of the artistic process, however, they assist in resolving the very problem they create by making art production into an explicit topic. Specifically, building on the depicted figures' budding adulthood and Raphaëlle's orientation on the staircase, the composition yields readily to interpretation as an allegory that is interpretable in several ways.⁹

As an allegory of artistic training, the painting resembles a metaphor from the introduction to

Lord Kames's famous *Elements of Criticism* (1762). Kames observed, “Those who apply to the arts . . . are led, step by step, from the easier parts of the operation, to what are more difficult; and are not permitted to make a new motion, till they are perfected in those which go before.”¹⁰ Peale might have known this passage; it was familiar to Joseph Hopkinson, son of his old friend Francis Hopkinson and a contributor to the Columbianum exhibition catalogue.¹¹ The notion of artistic effort as an uphill climb directed toward a literally lofty place draws on the ancient iconography of Mount Parnassus, abode of the nine Muses. Although in classical thought painting had no muse, contemporaries conventionally understood Parnassus as a site marking achievement in the arts broadly defined. John Singleton Copley invoked this imaginary place when waxing enthusiastic about the London career of his fellow countryman Benjamin West: “I sincerely rejoice in Mr West's successful progress towards the summit of that Mighty Mountain where the Everlasting Lauriels grow to adorn the brows of those Elustrious Artists that are so favoured of Heaven as to be able to unravel the intricate mazes of its rough and perilous Ascent.”¹²

The conventional coupling of progress in the arts with the progress of a civilization pointed interpreters of the *Staircase Group* to a national allegory. The rise of the United States was the keynote of the exhibition according to the unreferenced quotation on the catalogue cover: “’Tis not in mortals to command success, / But we'll do more, Sempronius, we'll deserve it.”¹³ These once-famous lines come from Joseph Addison's *Cato* (I, ii, 44–45), a favorite play for American readers and theatergoers during the colonial and revolutionary periods.¹⁴ Here Cato's son Portius displays his virtue before the senator Sempronius. To introduce an art exhibition with words uttered by a forward-looking republican of ancient Rome was to declare a link between art and politics, and to make America's development into the exhibit's theme. This forward-looking agenda found

tangible expression in the many preliminary drawings and series-in-progress on display.¹⁵

The *Staircase Group's* national allegory gathered force from its State House setting. Seen in the second-floor Senate Chamber by viewers who had just mounted several sets of steps, the painting implied that affairs of state were well settled and that the arts were now starting up from that solid foundation. A widespread rhetoric of optimism about national affairs included kindred images, as when Thomas Rodney proclaimed, "Every door is now Open to the Sons of genius and Science to enquire after Truth."¹⁶

Taken as an allegory of both artistic and national progress, the *Staircase Group* reinforced what the Columbianum had announced a month before the show opened—that drawing instruction was "the most important part of our institution, for cultivating the rising genius of the American Republic."¹⁷ Since the Columbianum intended to use exhibition proceeds to subsidize its school, the painting would flatter fee-paying viewers by reminding them that their attendance was aiding young artists to develop in their elevated endeavor.¹⁸ The federal government endorsed the Columbianum's program by making the Senate Chamber available free of charge, a fact that the group touted in its advertising.¹⁹

RISING TO CONSIDER THE "GREAT-FIRST-CAUSE"

A more comprehensive and ambitious way to interpret the *Staircase Group's* allegory involved its expressive figural relations. The catalogue epigraph raised the question of what humans in a divine framework can achieve. The painting's expressive arrangements could prompt an answer.

The spatial-temporal structure differentiates what we know about each of the youths. A good deal of Raphaelle's situation is self-evident. The painting shows each of his feet squarely planted on a step tread; the mahlstick provides a third point of stability. No such rationalized weight distribution

shapes the presentation of Titian. He probably hangs from his right arm, but we do not see it. Nor can we tell if he stands on one foot or two. His orientation to the space is similarly unclear. Does he pause as he comes down from the floor above, or has he turned to face the viewer on his way up?

Beyond the mystery of Titian's figure, a pair of indicating fingers leads from Raphaelle to Titian and to mysteries beyond. Raphaelle extends his right index finger along his mahlstick's length so as to indicate Titian, yet he does so in an anatomically impossible manner, wrapping his digit around the stick while pointing it upward. It is as if some causal relationship existed between this finger's defiance of ordinary nature and its proximity to Titian. The second brother evidently points toward the continuation of the staircase winding upward to his right, yet we know nothing about that space directly; we must extrapolate from what we see. The last visible part of this sequence is Titian's extended finger, obscured by a shadow seemingly cast by the door frame but actually painted as a part of the composition. We cannot see the culminating part of this ostensive gesture, for his fingertip seems to project behind the door frame. Expressively lit and situated, Titian's finger prompts us to consider further mysteries.

Augmenting the *Staircase Group's* allegory of achievement in painting, the paired brothers represent the belief that depicting nature yields insights into the divine creator. This idea had long before received an institutional foundation with the establishment in 1662 of England's Royal Society, whose members understood drawing as the study of nature, itself a practice endorsed by the recent rise of expectations that empirical inquiry would yield comprehension of the sacred scheme encompassing all things.²⁰ This attitude pervaded what has come to be called the Scientific Revolution, and it received a late, pithy formulation in Alexander Pope's *Essay on Man*: "Slave to no sect, who takes no private road, / But looks thro' Nature,

up to Nature's God" (IV, 331–32). The link between looking and divine knowledge was a constitutive element of Peale's deistic worldview. He framed this idea in relation to his museum in 1790, when advertising his hope that people would gain from their visit "information, which, with pleasing and elevated ruminations, will bring them nearer to the Great-First-Cause."²¹

Decades earlier, after two years of artistic training in London (1767–69), Peale already believed that making art enhanced the potent pairing of nature study and contemplation of the deity: "one rude line from Nature is worth an hundred from coppys, enlarges the Ideas and makes one see and feel with such sencesations—as are worthy of the author."²² Similarly, the depiction of Raphaelle proposes that viewers consider a role for the visual arts in the linked enterprises of studying nature and appreciating the creator. While aspiring artists understood their growing familiarity with the technical aspects of their training as an initiation into mysteries, the painting sets forth art's ultimate goal as directing viewers' attentions to mysteries loftier still.

This aspect of the *Staircase Group's* program engaged in a limited way with the goal of painting promoted by England's Royal Academy, which directed students to work toward an ideal style that pictured perfect, divine forms seldom accessible in daily experience.²³ Yet instead of representing divine forms, the *Staircase Group* was to serve as a visual prompt to foster thoughts about the divine order. To consider this aspect of the painting's allegory is to be encouraged to look through nature (and its imitations) up to nature's God. And in this lay a moral: like aspiring painters, viewers ought to strive to improve their understanding of the divine author of all things.

Museum advertising, tickets, and inscriptions all suggested a connection between the museum's contents and the divine order; Peale may have even inscribed "Look thro' Nature up to Natures God!" on a plaque that adorned the garden entrance.²⁴

Such an inscription would have increased the possibility that visitors would have a powerful, synergistic experience of word and image when viewing the *Staircase Group*. To move imaginatively from the step, "through" the painting's surface, and "up" the stairwell to Titian's obscure finger and beyond would be to follow a trajectory that reiterated the metaphoric kinds of "looking" that Pope famously recommended. To recollect his text while pondering the painting would be to allegorize one's own ocular and mental movements. Although a person could look through nature in many places, the depicted ticket emphasized these movements' kinship with a particular institution: in Peale's Museum, a person was to pursue a study that enhanced his or her appreciation of nature's divinity.

HIERARCHIES: PAINTINGS, INTERPRETATIONS, INTERPRETERS

Peale designed the *Staircase Group* to hail viewers in at least two ways; it invited them to appreciate a perceptual illusion (a matter of style) and to explore allegorical meaning (a matter of content).²⁵ The figure of Titian is especially striking with regard to the former. Had Peale first depicted his son's entire body and subsequently included only part of it in his painting—by trimming or folding the canvas, for example—then we might say that the painter had cropped it. Yet what Peale shows of this figure is presumably all of it that he ever designed. Although the remarkable pictorial invention that is Titian's body constitutes an artistic totality, the visual effect is that of a fragment. In dialogue with the illusion that the balance of Titian's body exists behind the door frame, the degree of shadow that falls on what we do see is varied so as to convey the impression that Titian's knee projects in front of the painting's surface. Paintings often have both naturalistic and allegorical aspects, but the special identity of the *Staircase Group* comes from its embedding such strong versions of each.

Moreover, illusionism and allegory each had its politics. In London, men who theorized about art recognized that painting could be pursued toward many ends but tended to rank as “low” those pictures that rendered only the world of ordinary visual experience, even or especially if they did so in a highly illusionistic manner. Writers counterposed various lofty alternatives to this limited achievement. In his first efforts at criticism in the periodical *The Idler*, the English painter Joshua Reynolds associated idealism with the Italian school of painting and mere imitation with the Dutch school. For him, these modes were mutually exclusive: “The Italian attends only to the invariable, the great and general ideas which are fixed and inherent in universal Nature; the Dutch, on the contrary, to literal truth and a minute exactness in the detail, as I may say, of Nature, modified by accident. The attention to these petty peculiarities is the very cause of this naturalness so much admired in the Dutch pictures, which, if we suppose it to be a beauty, is certainly of a lower order.” Identifying his preferred object of imitation as Nature, Reynolds associated art’s loftiest goal with an appropriately metaphysical end. He also asserted that the two modes ought not to coexist: “To desire to see the excellencies of each style united, to mingle the Dutch with the Italian School, is to join contraries which cannot subsist together, and which destroy the efficacy of each other.”²⁶

Reynolds was to play a major role in defining the ends of art for Americans of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, largely through his *Discourses*, which were delivered as lectures starting in 1769 when he was Royal Academy president and then published. Peale owned some of these *Discourses* by 1776, yet the example of the *Staircase Group* makes clear that he did not follow Reynolds in thinking that the real and the ideal need be confined to different paintings.²⁷

Daniel Webb’s *Inquiry into the Beauties of Painting*, however, offers an approach to realism and

idealism that accorded with Peale’s practice. It is likely that the painter knew Webb’s ideas from the outset of his career. Two years before Peale’s London trip of 1767, one of its sponsors, Charles Carroll of Carrollton—already familiar with Webb’s *Inquiry* himself—asked his London agent to send him a copy of that volume.²⁸

Webb promoted the highest kind of painting as a combination of low-ranked imitative and high-ranked imaginative modes. He distinguished between “imitations of such subjects as are actually before the eye” and “representations of those images which are formed by the fancy”: “The first, is the mechanick or executive part of the art; the second, the ideal or inventive.” Conceiving of the ideal broadly, he understood it to encompass not only representations of divine form but also all products of the imagination. Using the Italian word *sbozzo* (the rough draft or sketch of a picture) to elaborate on his high-ranking term, he nationalized his alternatives in the same way as Reynolds: “The great difference . . . arises from their different excellencies in these two parts: those, whose chief merit is in the mechanick, will, like the Dutch painters, be servile copiers of the works of nature; but those, who give wholly into the ideal, without perfecting themselves into the mechanick, will produce *sbozzo*’s.” According to Webb, “the perfection of the art consists in an union of these two parts.”²⁹

Such a combinatory aesthetic informs the *Staircase Group*, which, in its union of intensive versions of the mechanical and the ideal, suggests that Peale intended his painting to rank as a substantial artistic achievement.³⁰ Perhaps few of the painting’s viewers evaluated it in terms of Webb’s criteria, but this need not diminish our sense of the ambition that informed its creation. Viewers certainly applied the categories of low and high to the canvas as installed. The future painter Charles Robert Leslie, for example, embraced each in turn. Thinking back on his boyhood experience of the *Staircase Group* in Peale’s Museum, he recalled how he had

believed the picture to be “perfection.” Yet his adoption of Reynoldsian criteria as an adult eventually led him to conclude that the canvas was “the work of a very ordinary painter.” Dismissing the wonder raised by his early encounter and remaining unaware of the painting’s allegorical tendency, he stated that he had “since learned that deception to the degree in which it was here, with the assistance of a little ingenious management, attained, depends merely on carefully copying some of the most obvious appearances of Nature.”³¹

People also thought hierarchically when evaluating modes of viewing and types of viewers. According to a divisive sociology of reception common among Great Britain’s seventeenth- and eighteenth-century elites and their ideologues, high social rank correlated with perspicacious viewing. William Aglionby likened the legibility of pictures to that of books but posited that mutually exclusive groups of viewers engaged with them in different ways: “Secret Beauties are the great Charm of Life to Dilicate Souls; but they want nice Observers to be enjoyed; and Pictures have that singular Priviledge, that though they seem Legible *Books*, yet they are perfect *Hieroglyphicks* to the *Vulgar*, and are all alike to them.”³²

Yet by the mid-eighteenth century neither theory nor practice allowed this commonplace, elite-biased account of reception to go unchallenged. Notably, the target audience of middling readers for R. Campbell’s *London Tradesman*, a survey of all manner of metropolitan labor, would be gratified by its description of what painters do: “[The Painter’s] Piece is a Relation of Facts and Characters in Hieroglyphics, instead of Words: He speaks a dumb, but expressive, Language, that is understood by all Mankind. In this respect he has the Advantage of the Historian, who is confined to one Tongue or Nation, and obliged to express his Thoughts by Symbols, which have no natural Relation to Things signified.”³³ Here Campbell has shifted the meaning of “Hieroglyphics” from a sign capable of being

understood by only some people, as in Aglionby’s usage, to a sign interpretable by all. His claim might have originated with developments in sign theory, for John Locke drew attention to language’s artifices and capacity for misinterpretation.³⁴

Another challenge to the claim that “the better sort” possessed a natural superiority when it came to the art of pictorial interpretation arose from the expertise of “the lower sort” and “the middling sort” with various kinds of emblems, that is, allegorical pictures used for popular religious, moral, and political ends. Featuring conspicuous symbols rather than a seamless naturalism, such imagery circulated in books but also coursed through streets and shops on banners and prints during mass political protests.³⁵ The currency of skills for interpreting explicitly allegorical pictures among lower sorts confounded any claim about the innate supremacy of better-sort viewers.

Peale’s background familiarized him with such popular pictorial strategies, for his artisanal alliances gave him direct access to the sorts of allegorical pictures that circulated in street politics during the 1760s, the decade that he first pursued painting as a career. He helped to make a banner for a Stamp Act protest in Newburyport in 1765 and designed allegorical banners for military companies in Baltimore and Norfolk a decade later.³⁶

Peale occupied a complex position in the hierarchy of social ranks. His father had been born into a line of succession to an English landed estate, yet through various eventualities—including forging checks in His Majesty’s post office—the elder Peale was pursuing a modest career as a schoolmaster in Maryland when he died in 1750. Charles Willson Peale was nine years old at the time, and it was during the next decade that he worked as a saddler’s apprentice.³⁷ Although he never inherited the estate he had been promised, this expectation (which lasted until his London years, when he learned the sad truth of his circumstances) endowed him with a sense of self manifest in such telling ways as his

pursuit of familiar conversation with gentry such as the Virginia planter James Arbuckle and the Maryland polymath John Beale Bordley. By the 1790s he identified himself with achieving whatever rank he occupied in life through his talent and virtue. Valuing merit in himself, he sought to reward and reproduce it in the reception that he programmed into the *Staircase Group*. Possessed of a self-image that drew on low as well as high aspects of the social order, Peale created a work that made a theme of high and low in the realm of art as well as among its viewers.

The basic (and base) response to the *Staircase Group* lay with its illusionism, and this is where viewers like the young C. R. Leslie let the matter lie. Yet when considered as the counterpart to the more demanding detection and interpretation of content undertaken by allegory readers, the experience of illusionism assumes the character of a strategy designed to appeal to, and include, viewers uninitiated or undereducated in viewing art. This would be a concern of direct relevance to the project of creating a broad constituency for the arts. The allegorical program offered satisfactions for the savvy, including the pleasures of detecting its meanings, being inspired and ennobled by its lessons, and sensing oneself as distinguished among viewers—not all of whom, it may be imagined, made the transition from the lower to the higher mode of reception. Offering clues to enable viewers to rise from one mode to another, the *Staircase Group* spurred education while representing ideas about it. Capable of aiding viewers to renegotiate their relationship to viewing art, the painting could cultivate a kind of elite that Peale conceived in his own image.

UNIFIED RECEPTION, DIVIDED RECEPTION: CONTEXTS AND ANALOGUES

In programming the *Staircase Group* to generate diverse publics, Peale produced a variant on British ideas about hierarchy in taste, according to which

some responses to works of art (and thus some viewers) were more distinguished than others. In the new nation, this work of engendering viewer classes was a defining aspect of an intermittent project of cultivating a public for high art—an enterprise bent on the culture of culture, as it were.³⁸ With regard to the day's political discourse, the viewer segments predicted by the *Staircase Group* spoke to the ancient populace categories “the many” and “the few.” These categories were no less central to the conceptualization of republics than they were to the United States Constitution, framed in 1787 on the floor below the one on which the Columbianum had its exhibition. With his ambitious showpiece, Peale envisioned—and to some extent created—an art-centered social hierarchy that shadowed, reformulated, and implicitly commented on the organization of America's political society.

Ratification decisively shifted power away from the state governments, whose lower houses were considered the “democratic parts of our constitutions,”³⁹ and toward a centralized federal system led by the few rather than the many. The Anti-Federalist Samuel Chase complained that the new government had been set up so that, compared with the explicitly exclusive Senate, even a post in the more populous House of Representatives “is too high & exalted to be filled but [by] the *first Men* in the State in point of Fortune & Influence. In fact no order or class of the people will be represented in the House of Representatives called the Democratic Branch but the rich & wealthy.”⁴⁰ The Federalists instituted an elitist theory of democracy but did so by using a rhetoric of common democracy that described all officeholders as fulfilling the mandate of “the people.”⁴¹ Seen in this light, the *Staircase Group*—a painting whose illusionism made it accessible to the many but whose array of allegories would be grasped by relatively few—found an apt initial exhibition venue in the State House, meeting place of the Federal Constitutional Convention.

The need for a workable language of entitlement

brought about the revival of the “natural aristocrat,” a social type that implicated the aristocrats of England as artificial. Clearly Americans choosing leaders could not imitate England's order, headed by men who had inherited landed wealth and titles. This system had been problematic during the colonial period: America had no native aristocrats, and landownership was more widespread than in England. Moreover, faith in this ideal of order broke down completely with the revolution. In its place arose the notion of a natural aristocracy led by men whose innate talent and virtue clearly established them as capable leaders. Given that such advantages as landed wealth, classical education, and social connections enabled some men to rise above worse-off and less-prepared contemporaries, however, the old order continued to shape the new. Antagonisms between men who thought that only those with wealth, education, experience, and high connections were fit to make law and others who believed that talent and virtue were the only salient criteria profoundly shaped the early national period.⁴²

More generally, many Americans feared that their nascent experiment in republican government would meet a quick and miserable end. They worried that posterity would hold them responsible for missing a unique opportunity to establish virtuous self-government.⁴³ The Whiskey Rebellion, in which western Pennsylvania farmers violently defied tax laws passed by urban legislators, offered the most dramatic instance of the national fabric under stress. In a stark juxtaposition, both the whiskey rebels' trial and the Columbianum exhibition opened in Philadelphia in May 1795.

Pleasing presentations of American art created a reassuring sense of national health in this environment. The Columbianum even represented itself as promoting the common welfare with its entrance fee, which was “to defray the expences of the school, in which the youth of our country may have an opportunity of studying and improving their talents in the fine arts, and thereby supercede the necessity

and save the expence of a foreign education.”⁴⁴

At one level, the *Staircase Group* produced communal unity. Every viewer could enjoy the illusion of two young men on a staircase—an aspect of the canvas that coheres the public in a single response. Like the cultural work of the day's public festivities and parades, the situation that Peale created with his painting would make every member of “the people” who could afford the entrance fee feel acknowledged and included.⁴⁵ Although at any moment only a few people or a single person might be looking at the canvas, it could call to each viewer's mind a commonality with absent citizens who would also find the illusion compelling. This effect participated in the movement to produce spectacles accessible to all ranks that in 1795 was affecting public speaking styles and even shaping Congress Hall. Since 1791 legislators such as James Monroe had been pursuing a way to make the hall's Senate Chamber accessible to the public. In late 1795 the master carpenter George Forepaugh supervised Henry Clayton and others in the construction of a viewing gallery.⁴⁶

Yet the reception that Peale designed the *Staircase Group* to evoke was also predicated on a politics of division. Justifications varied, but most people believed that distinctions ought to exist in a society. At the Columbianum and Peale's Museum, the entrance fee was one factor standing in the way of a universal experience. Furthermore, although all viewers could enjoy a rousing experience of the *Staircase Group's* illusionism, a select constituency had access to its more cerebral pleasures.

With sufficient study of this ambitious painting, capable visitors—who might be described as a natural aristocracy of art viewers—received their reward. The Columbianum and Peale's Museum encouraged frequent visits, and repeat customers who pursued intensive viewing of the *Staircase Group* (and thereby gained insight into its allegories) might come to believe that they had gotten their money's worth. From this vantage, the car-

pentered step with which Peale marked the transition from the viewer's space into the virtual space of the painting is not only the most audacious feat of the illusionistic aspect of his program but also, quite literally, an effort to reach out to his painting's viewers. Proffering a near-irresistible invitation to ascend virtually, the sequence from step to canvas to picture space implied the transformation that could take place in one's experience of the painting when moving from a low-ranked engagement with illusionism to a high-ranked reading of allegory. Some would climb to interpretive heights; others would not. In this manner, a *meritocracy* of art viewers would order itself.

This kind of mobility accords with one of two kinds generally recognized during the early national period. One kind of mobility endorsed the rise of exceptional men, and the other allowed for personal improvement within the rank into which one had been born.⁴⁷ It is the second kind that the painting makes possible, yet it hardly counts as mobility according to latter-day criteria. Although discerning the *Staircase Group's* allegories would facilitate a sense of distinction, it would be a distinction without a difference for one's rank.

ORIENTATIONS TOWARD CULTURING CULTURE: THE 1790S AND BEYOND

Peale believed that people were born into inherited positions and, with few exceptions, ought to stay there. In his lectures on natural history, he buttressed this idea by representing it as the way of nature and the divine plan. For him, natural history was "a field affording the most striking examples of the beneficence of Providence with charming models for every social duty, in order to render man wiser, better, and more content in the station where he is placed."⁴⁸ Likewise, the *Staircase Group* pertains to distinctions *within* the extant social order. To experience the distinction that it cultivates was to enable viewers to occupy their stations with a greater sense

of satisfaction. This sense could permeate viewers' subjectivity, yet it would not change their standing. In this regard, advancement in knowledge about art resembled the general educational vision of Thomas Jefferson, whose proposal for elementary schools sought to "promote in every order of men the degree of instruction proportioned to their condition, and to their views in life."⁴⁹

This conception of the social order has a visual correlate in the *Staircase Group's* hierarchically ranked, immobile figures. The fact of stasis is clearest in the case of the top-ranked Titian, but it is also true for Raphaelle, who neither moves nor is positioned to do so.⁵⁰ Even though his diagonally disposed body alludes to movement throughout its length, he does not and cannot go up. His face, turned to the viewer rather than into the stairwell, is but one telling detail. His feet, turned to accommodate different tread depths on two successive steps, are impractically positioned for climbing. Neither foot touches or overlaps any edge of any step, so that each foot conveys the impression of being placed to stay put. Peale also orchestrated Raphaelle's immobility with respect to his relationship to Titian, who firmly occupies the inside position on the staircase toward which the splay of Raphaelle's legs might otherwise position him to climb. Another aspect of Raphaelle's stasis involves the iconography of the mahlstick—a tool whose only job is to enable the arm that holds it to remain perfectly immobile. Such a stick would make an appropriate aid while Raphaelle held a difficult pose for an extended time. As a pictorial attribute, it marks him as enduringly stationed.⁵¹

Static hierarchy is also a feature of the *Staircase Group* when interpreted as an allegory of the conventional hierarchy of painting genres. The still life (the ticket on the step) occupying the bottom of the canvas and the portraits dominating the top signal the relative status of two categories within the graded genres of painting; that is, the lower status of still lifes is noted by its positioning below the por-

traits. The low term in this allegory also includes the imitation wood-graining of the step risers. As installed, the low got lower still, for the carpentered step with which Peale commenced this sequence instanced a paradigmatically low-ranking manual labor. This bottom-most element of the ensemble sets off the kind of labor—here literally as well as figuratively higher—required to create illusions of space and solids with paint. While the painting as a whole stands as a hybrid of genres, its compositional order ensures that each constitutive genre is in its proper place.⁵²

These expressive aspects of the *Staircase Group* parallel an art world where expertise was a means of distinction without consequence for social standing, a situation attested to by a pair of incidents from the 1820s that show the static aspect of Philadelphia's hierarchical order in operation.⁵³ During the summer of 1820, the concurrence of the ninth annual exhibition of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts (founded in 1805) and the display of François Marius Granet's touring *Choir of the Capuchin Chapel* provided the context for one of these incidents (Fig. 1.2).⁵⁴ According to Peale, the topic of the *Choir* motivated an exchange at the academy between his former Columbianum colleague, the engraver James Thackara, and an unnamed man.⁵⁵

Mr. Thackara says the taste of the Citizens is a burlesk on the Arts. A Gentleman who had seen it [Granet's *Choir*] & was praising it in high strains, Thackara asked him in what its merit consisted, he replied, that it was a perfect deception, as being every thing in a painting—He wanted a Catalogue & Mr. Thackara pointed to a Catalogue which hung by the door, painted by your Brother Raphaelle on a piece of Tin, The Gentleman stepping forward took hold of it—ah! says Mr. Thackara, this must be the perfection of the art, since I see you are deceived & took hold of it.⁵⁶

Thackara shared Peale's taste for works that embraced the ideal pictorial mode; however, the overall



FIGURE 1.2 Thomas Sully, *Interior of the Capuchin Chapel in the Piazza Barberini*, 1821. Copy of François Marius Granet, *Choir of the Capuchin Chapel*, ca. 1814. Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence Goichman. Courtesy Sotheby's.

effect of Granet's *Choir* strongly allied it with the mechanical. So striking are the optical effects created by the sunlight streaming through the choir's central windows, the thinning shadows, and the relative obscurity of the choir's rear wall and vaults that, on seeing one version of the composition, a cardinal reportedly requested permission to examine the canvas from the back so as to satisfy himself that Granet had not hidden a mirror there.⁵⁷ Not necessarily opposed to the mechanical mode *per se*, Thackara lamented that some people relished it exclusively.⁵⁸

Yet Thackara's encounter at the academy revealed more than his aesthetic priorities and his belief that his own tastes were superior to those of most of his fellows. He believed that such a state

of affairs entitled him to occupy high moral ground. From such an elevated stance, Thackara took advantage of his prior knowledge of a deceptive painting by Raphaelle Peale to conduct a sarcastic display and to show that he believed that someone whose taste was “a burlesk on the Arts” deserved to be burlesqued himself.

The exchange possibly had a class component, for Thackara was a middling-sort artisan and his companion was a “Gentleman,” according to Peale, for whom the word could carry overtones of high rank.⁵⁹ And although Thackara used his knowledge of art to confer distinction on himself, it did not assist his capacity to behave in a lofty manner, at least according to the eighteenth-century standard that true gentlemen pursued reasoned debate and conversation. As Peale related the story, the engraver never bothered to inform his unfortunate companion about what might constitute a loftier goal for painting than deception.

Although Peale probably agreed with Thackara about the low state of taste among their fellow citizens, he did not take sides when recounting this event. The painter did not declaim on such points, a matter of personal style that becomes clearer when considering an instance of his encountering ignorance about art in a social superior. That man was Joseph Hopkinson. As the third in a family line of prominent Philadelphia lawyers and as a founder and president of the Pennsylvania Academy, he was a highly visible member of the city’s elite. In 1824 Peale showed him a recent self-portrait with his “back to the light,” but, Peale reported, Hopkinson “seemed to be better pleased if I had painted it which [with] the light in front” (Fig. 1.3). This preference prompted Peale to make a second self-portrait (Fig. 1.4). At the time, he predicted, “The Painters will admire that painted in a reflected light [see Fig. 1.3], but the multitude will like the other better [see Fig. 1.4], as they cannot conceive how the light should fall on my back without a window was painted behind me.”⁶⁰

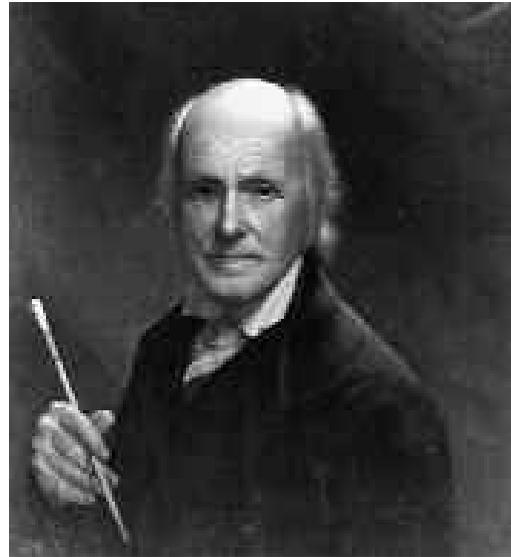


FIGURE 1.3 Charles Willson Peale, *Self-Portrait in the Character of a Painter*, 1824. Courtesy of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia. Gift of the artist.

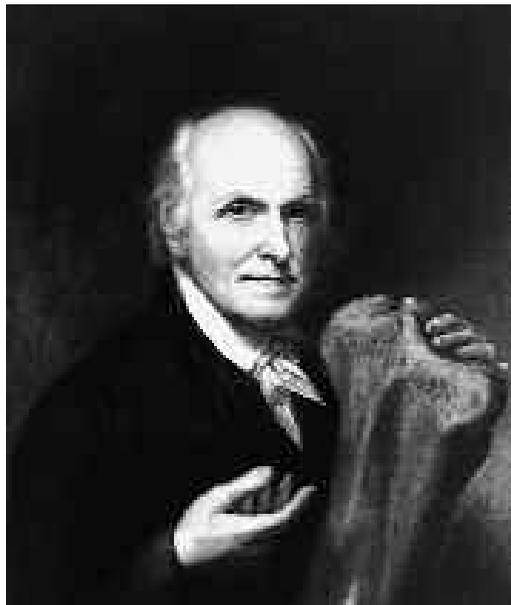


FIGURE 1.4 Charles Willson Peale, *Self-Portrait in the Character of a Naturalist*, 1824. Collection of The New-York Historical Society, 1940.202.

Such incomprehension dissipates when one realizes that Peale drew on an enduring symbolism of light beaming from above.⁶¹ Like the *Staircase Group*, the self-portrait concerned the relationship between art and the divine. In this instance, the painting did not concern the value of art in learning about Nature but rather the ties between artistic creativity and the source of all creation. Nor was light the painting’s only symbolic element. Inverting his brush from the usual way one holds such a tool and thereby rendering it useless for applying pigment to canvas, the depicted Peale presents the viewer with a conspicuous sign. His brush has become an index: it points heavenward. Oriented at an angle different from the light source that illuminates him, it also suggests a gap between human (in particular, artistic) knowledge and things divine. Peale’s belief that “Painters will admire that painted in a reflected light” invokes his colleagues’ capacity to appreciate technical expertise, but his comment is inseparable from his expectation that they will also understand his earlier self-portrait’s iconography. Seeding an exclusive iconography in his self-portrait as a painter and not as a naturalist, he indicated his sense of painting as a field for constructing himself as a distinct variety of natural aristocrat.

Hopkinson had criticized the painting from a pragmatic standpoint that prevented him from comprehending its symbolic prompts. Abundantly talented in other areas, he was wanting in this one, yet a prudent Peale kept the matter to himself. Maintaining the deferential habits he had developed in his youth, the discrete painter was occupying his field of expertise without sharing the esoteric knowledge he had cultivated. While in most matters Hopkinson numbered among the few, in the hierarchy of art viewers he was one of the many, or, as Peale implied, “the multitude.”

Declining to explicate his work for a social better, Peale behaved as he had before Washington—that is, if Washington had ever been fooled by the *Staircase Group*; the story that has come down to us

makes no mention of Peale’s offering him a remedial lesson in interpretive strategies. Unlike Thackara, who treated his companion to a harsh and partial lesson, Peale relished his distinction privately.⁶² In addition to a sense of acceptable behavior different from his engraver friend’s, he maintained a different vision of the role of knowledge about art. It was not a fixed point from which to lord oneself above others but rather a goal of self-culture.

Like *Self-Portrait in the Character of a Painter* (see Fig. 1.3), Peale intended the *Staircase Group* to produce a class of knowing viewers capable of enjoying a sense of difference from others. Requiring talent and virtue (especially the quality of perseverance), interpretation in these instances aligned viewers with one of the day’s character ideals. But to the extent that these paintings created occasions for realizing that ideal, doing so did not raise viewers in the order of daily life. Significantly, figures in both paintings indicate the space above and beyond them to invoke the divine order that was one of art’s most advantageous alliances. Thus, in these instances, education in the ways of art was to enable meritorious, middling-sort viewers who trained their eyes on loftier things than matters of rank to occupy their stations with greater contentment.

NOTES

This essay arose out of a conversation with John Davis, whose interest in my work has made a world of difference. I presented initial thoughts at the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, January 30, 2001. I thank those attending for spirited comments; John Davis, Sidney Hart, and Tess Mann for generous assistance in obtaining photographs; Stephanie Fay and Gil Kelly for sensitive editing; and Patricia Johnston, Angela Miller, Fredrika J. Teute, and, especially, Alan Wallach for valuable remarks on drafts.

1. “Premiums,” *Aurora General Advertiser*, May 16, 1795. See, in general, Lorraine Smith Pangle and Thomas L. Pangle, *The Learning of Liberty: The Ed-*

- ucational Ideas of the American Founders (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1993).
2. For the Columbianum, see Wendy Bellion, "Illusion and Allusion: Charles Willson Peale's Staircase Group at the Columbianum Exhibition," *American Art* 17, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 20–24. Charles Coleman Sellers, *Portraits and Miniatures by Charles Willson Peale, Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, vol. 42, pt. 1 (1952): 167, suggested that Peale created the Staircase Group for the Columbianum exhibit, an idea developed in Bellion, "Illusion and Allusion," pp. 18–39.
 3. For Peale's Museum (also called the Philadelphia Museum), see David R. Brigham, *Public Culture in the Early Republic: Peale's Museum and Its Audience* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995). For the painting's ongoing display, see *Historical Catalogue of the Paintings in the Philadelphia Museum, consisting chiefly of Portraits of Revolutionary Patriots and other Distinguished Characters* (Philadelphia, 1813), p. 54.
 4. This is one application of the concept of habitus developed in Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 78.
 5. *The Pursuit of Knowledge under Difficulties: From Self-Improvement to Adult Education in America, 1750–1990* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1994).
 6. Rembrandt Peale, "Reminiscences. By Rembrandt Peale. The Person and Mien of Washington," *The Crayon* 3, pt. 3 (April 1856): 100.
 7. Lillian B. Miller, Sidney Hart, and David C. Ward, eds., *The Selected Papers of Charles Willson Peale and His Family*, vol. 5: *The Autobiography of Charles Willson Peale* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 450 (hereafter *Selected Papers* 5).
 8. For example, Nicolai Cikovsky Jr., "Democratic Illusions," in *Raphaelle Peale Still Lifes* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1988), pp. 40–43. David C. Ward and Sidney Hart, "Subversion and Illusion in the Art of Raphaelle Peale," *American Art* 8 (summer–fall 1994): 112–13, describe the protruding step as unnaturalistic. But Eric Gollanek shows that such steps were common in Philadelphia housing (and indeed were a feature of the row house that Raphaelle was renting in 1798). Gollanek, "Building the Working Class City: Identity and Architectural Form in South Philadelphia, 1760–1850" (paper presented at the McNeil Center for Early American Studies, September 20, 2001).
 9. Lillian B. Miller was perhaps first among the Staircase Group's historians to note its allegorical tendency; "The Legacy," in *The Peale Family: Creation of a Legacy, 1770–1870*, ed. Lillian B. Miller (New York: Abbeville Press, 1996), p. 51. See also Bellion, "Illusion and Allusion," pp. 27–33. Peale mentioned the Staircase Group in his late autobiography prior to describing his staircase self-portrait (1823, destroyed) in allegorical terms: "with my left foot on the lower step & the other behind as coming down stairs, this may be truly imblematical of his descending in life"; *Selected Papers* 5:450.
 10. Henry Home (Lord Kames), *Elements of Criticism*, 6th ed. (1785; rpt., New York: Garland, 1972), p. 8.
 11. On Hopkinson and the Columbianum, see Rembrandt Peale, "Reminiscences. Exhibitions and Academies," *The Crayon* 1, no. 19 (May 9, 1855): 290. Hopkinson quoted a related passage from *Elements of Criticism* in his *Annual Discourse, Delivered Before the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts on the 13th of November, 1810* (Philadelphia: Bradford and Inskeep, 1810), p. 25.
 12. John Singleton Copley to John Greenwood, January 25, 1771, in *Letters & Papers of John Singleton Copley and Henry Pelham, 1739–1776*, ed. Guernsey Jones, Massachusetts Historical Society Collections, vol. 71 (Boston, 1914), pp. 105–6.
 13. *The Exhibition of the Columbianum or American Academy of Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, & c., Established at Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Francis & Robert Bailey, 1795), cover.
 14. Joseph Addison, *Cato: A Tragedy and Selected Essays* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2004).
 15. *Exhibition of the Columbianum*, cat. nos. 17, 50, 115, 116, 120, 128.
 16. Thomas Rodney to Thomas Jefferson, September 1790, in *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. 17: *6 July to 3 November 1790*, ed. Julian P. Boyd and Lucius Wilmerding Jr. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1965), p. 548.
 17. *Dunlap and Claypoole's American Daily Advertiser*, April 8, 1795; *Aurora General Advertiser*, April 8, 1795.
 18. See, e.g., *Dunlap and Claypoole's American Daily Advertiser*, June 1, 1795.
 19. See, e.g., *Gazette of the United States*, April 30, 1795.
 20. Ann Bermingham, *Learning to Draw: Studies in the Cultural History of a Polite and Useful Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 64–73.
 21. Broadside, Peale's Museum, February 1, 1790, in *The Selected Papers of Charles Willson Peale and His Family*, vol. 1: *Charles Willson Peale: The Artist in Revolutionary America, 1735–1791*, ed. Lillian B. Miller, Sidney Hart, and Toby A. Appel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), p. 580 (hereafter *Selected Papers* 1). This was one of Peale's most often repeated ideas about the museum.
 22. Charles Willson Peale to Edmund Jennings, July 18, 1771, *Selected Papers* 1:101.
 23. Beginning in 1792, the academy president was Benjamin West, Peale's teacher during his London studies. For West's idealist orientation, see Franziska Forster-Hahn, "The Sources of True Taste: Benjamin West's Instructions to a Young Painter for His Studies in Italy," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 30 (1967): 367–82.
 24. See, e.g., Brigham, *Public Culture*, pp. 36–37, Figs. 8, 22; Charles Willson Peale, "A Walk through the Philadelphia Museum," in *The Collected Papers of Charles Willson Peale and His Family, 1735–1885*, ed. Lillian B. Miller (Millwood, N.Y.: KTO Microform, 1980), IID/27E5–6, describes the museum's inscriptions in sometimes ambiguous terms. In 1795 the fact that the Philadelphia botanist John Bartram (d. 1777) had displayed Pope's couplet above his greenhouse door had just been published locally in J. Hector St. John [de Crèvecoeur], *Letters from an American Farmer* (Philadelphia: Matthew Carey, 1793), 194.
 25. This point adapts to visual materials Bakhtin's ideas about modes of enunciation in relation to verbal expression. See "The Problem of Speech Genres," in M. M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, trans. Vern W. McGee, ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), pp. 60–103.
 26. Joshua Reynolds, "To the Idler," October 20, 1759, in *The Literary Works of Sir Joshua Reynolds*, 2 vols. (London: H. G. Bohn, 1855), 2:128.
 27. See John Adams to Abigail Adams, August 21, 1776, in *Adams Family Correspondence*, ed. L. H. Butterfield (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963), 2:104.
 28. Charles Carroll to Daniel Carroll, September 5, 1765, in *Dear Papa, Dear Charley: The Peregrinations of a Revolutionary Aristocrat*, 3 vols., ed. Ronald Hoffman, Sally D. Mason, Eleanor S. Darcy (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 1:373. I remain in Sally Mason's debt for bringing this reference to my attention.
 29. Daniel Webb, *An Inquiry into the Beauties of Painting; and into the Merits of the most Celebrated Painters, Ancient and Modern* (London: R. and J. Dodsley, 1760), pp. 4–5.
 30. Peale emphasized the ideal and the mechanical by turns when writing about the combination of these pictorial modes: Charles Willson Peale to Thomas Jefferson, July 3, 1820, in *The Selected Papers of Charles Willson Peale and His Family*, vol. 3: *The Belfield Farm Years, 1810–1820*, ed. Lillian B. Miller, Sidney Hart, David C. Ward (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1991), p. 831 (hereafter *Selected Papers* 3); Charles Willson Peale to Rubens Peale, July 6, 7, 1823, in *The Selected Papers of Charles Willson Peale and His Family*, vol. 4: *Charles Willson Peale: His Last Years, 1821–1827*, ed. Lillian B. Miller, Sidney Hart, and David C. Ward (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 292 (hereafter *Selected Papers* 4).
 31. Charles Robert Leslie, *Hand-book for Young Painters* (London: John Murray, 1887), p. 3. Presumably, "ingenious management" referred to an actual step and door frame.
 32. William Aglionby, *Painting Illustrated in Three Dialogues* (1685; rpt., Portland, Ore.: Collegium

- Graphicum, 1972), unpaginated “Epistle Dedicatory.” See also Jonathan Richardson, “A Discourse on the Dignity, Certainty, Pleasure and Advantage, of the Science of a Connoisseur,” *Two Discourses* (1725; rpt., Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1998), pp. 221–22; Kames, *Elements of Criticism*, p. 5.
33. R. Campbell, *The London Tradesman. Being a Compendious View of all the Trades, Professions, Arts, both Liberal and Mechanic* (1747; rpt., New York: A. M. Kelley, 1969), pp. 98–99.
34. See the chapter “Of the Imperfection of Words,” in John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), pp. 475–90.
35. People often called these signs *emblems*, a word also denoting a specific, esoteric format for combining pictures and texts; see Mario Praz, *Studies in Seventeenth-Century Imagery*, 2d ed. (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1964). For useful studies of popular religious, moral, and political emblems, respectively, see Alan Wallach, “The Voyage of Life as Popular Art,” *Art Bulletin* 59, no. 2 (June 1977): 234–41; Steven C. Bullock, “‘Sensible Signs’: The Emblematic Education of Post-Revolutionary Freemasonry,” in *A Republic for the Ages: The United States Capitol and the Political Culture of the Early Republic* (Charlottesville: United States Capitol Historical Society by the University Press of Virginia, 1999), pp. 177–213; and Diana Donald, *The Age of Caricature: Satirical Prints in the Reign of George III* (New Haven, Conn.: Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art by Yale University Press, 1996).
36. *Selected Papers* 5:47; Charles Willson Peale to John Dixon, September–October 1774; and Charles Willson Peale to John Pinkney, January–February 25, 1775, *Selected Papers* 1:136–37, 137 n. 2, 138–39, 139 n. 3.
37. Charles Coleman Sellers, *Charles Willson Peale* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1969), pp. 3–23, offers a lively introduction to Peale’s early biography.
38. Such a project was a defining counterpart of the production of production described in Laura Rigal, *The American Manufactory: Art, Labor, and the World of Things in the Early Republic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).
39. Notes on an oration by Edmund Randolph, in *The Records of the Federal Convention of 1787*, 4 vols., rev. ed., ed. Max Farrand (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1966), 1:26.
40. Samuel Chase, notes, quoted in Philip A. Crowl, “Anti-Federalism in Maryland, 1787–1788,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 4 (1947): 464.
41. Gordon S. Wood, *Creation of the American Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969), p. 517.
42. *Ibid.*, pp. 197–255, 471–518, passim, chronicles the emergence of the category “natural aristocrat” in America.
43. John R. Howe Jr., “Republican Thought and the Political Violence of the 1790’s,” *American Quarterly* 19, no. 2, pt. 1 (Summer 1967): 147–65.
44. *Dunlap and Claypoole’s American Daily Advertiser*, June 1, 1795; *Aurora General Advertiser*, June 1, 1795.
45. David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776–1820* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), examines the roles of parading and festivities in relation to early national factions.
46. Jay Fliegelman, *Declaring Independence: Jefferson, Natural Language, & the Culture of Performance* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1993), pp. 25–28 and passim; Frank M. Etting, *An Historic Account of the Old State House of Pennsylvania, now known as the Hall of Independence* (Philadelphia: Porter and Coates, 1891), pp. 145–46.
47. See Wood, *Creation*, pp. 478–79; Christopher Lasch, “Social Mobility,” in *A Companion to American Thought*, ed. Richard Wightman Fox and James T. Kloppenberg (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1995), pp. 632–34.
48. Charles Willson Peale to Timothy Matlack, March 9, 1800, in *Selected Papers* 2:283.
49. Thomas Jefferson to Joseph C. Cabell, November 28, 1820, in *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, 10 vols., ed. Paul Leicester Ford (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1892–99), 10:167.
50. Peale’s only description of the painting, which appeared under the heading “Charles Willson Peale” in the Columbianum exhibition catalogue, makes no reference to a figure ascending: “Whole length—Portraits of two of his Sons on a stair case”; *The Exhibition of the Columbianum*, cat. no. [61]. His son Rubens called the painting “The stair-case, with a whole length figure going up and a person looking down” in the museum catalogue of 1813; *Historical Catalogue*, p. 54.
51. Although this stasis undermines the previously discussed variants of an allegory of progress, initial viewings of Raphaëlle nonetheless tend to convey the impression that he is rising. This stationary figure not only coincides with Charles Willson Peale’s opinions about fixed social ranks but also with his low estimate of Raphaëlle as a painter; recall Kames: “Those who apply to the arts . . . are not permitted to make a new motion, till they are perfected in those which go before.” *Elements of Criticism*, p. 8. *Selected Papers* 5:485–86 cites the contentious secondary literature on Charles Willson’s difficult relationship with Raphaëlle. The figures’ relative elevations may represent the different degrees of esteem that the father accorded his sons. For Charles Willson’s pride in Titian’s art, see Charles Willson Peale to Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, April 30, 1797, in *The Selected Papers of Charles Willson Peale and his Family*, vol. 2: *The Artist as Museum Keeper, 1791–1810*, ed. Lillian B. Miller, Sidney Hart, and David C. Ward (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), pp. 200–201 (hereafter *Selected Papers* 2).
52. Peale noted the conventional ranking of still lifes and portraits in Charles Willson Peale to Angelica Peale Robinson, June 16, 1808, *Selected Papers* 2:1087; *Selected Papers* 5:327.
53. Mark Decker, “A Bumpkin before the Bar: Charles Brockden Brown’s *Arthur Mervyn* and Class Anxiety in Postrevolutionary Philadelphia,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 124, no. 4 (October 2000): 469–87, analyzes a contemporary novel in relation to that social order’s fluid aspect.
54. The painting reproduced is Thomas Sully’s copy after the version of the *Choir* shown at Earle’s Gallery in Philadelphia.
55. Although two Thackaras were active as artists in Philadelphia in 1820, Peale’s use of the title “Mr.” suggests that he had in mind James Thackara (b. 1767) rather than James’s son William (b. 1791).
56. Charles Willson Peale to Rembrandt Peale, July 23, 1820, *Selected Papers* 3:840–41.
57. Isabelle Néto-Daguerre, “Un tableau de Granet au Musée des Beaux-Arts de Lyon: Le Choeur des Capucins de la place Barberini,” *Bulletin des Musées et Monuments Lyonnais*, nos. 1–2 (1994): 15.
58. John Davis, “Catholic Envy: The Visual Culture of Protestant Desire,” in *The Visual Culture of American Religions*, ed. David Morgan and Sally Promey (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), pp. 123–27, provides another basis for understanding the role of aesthetics in Thackara’s response, for the status of Granet’s Italian Catholic subject matter as a curiosity for Protestant viewers distanced the canvas from the estimable category of “the general,” then universally associated with high art.
59. Thackara’s taxable wealth of 50 pounds located him in the 30th percentile of Peale’s Museum subscribers in 1794; Brigham, *Public Culture in the Early Republic*, p. 162. Jackson Turner Main, *The Social Structure of Revolutionary America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), pp. 209, 217–19, 226–33, considers the available meanings of “gentleman.”
60. Charles Willson Peale to Eliza Patterson Peale, April 18, 1824, *Selected Papers* 4:396. Charles Willson Peale to Rembrandt Peale and Rubens Peale, March 20, 1824, *Selected Papers* 4:389, describes the technical challenges posed by the portrait with his “back to the light.”
61. Peale had recently painted divine light illuminating a bald pate in his copy of Charles Catton Jr.’s *Noah and His Ark* (1819; Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts).
62. See also Peale’s private amusement at uninformed uses of fine arts terms (Charles Willson Peale to Raphaëlle Peale, May 14, 1820, in *Selected Papers* 3:821), and his parting reproof of such displays (*Selected Papers* 5:304).