



Smithsonian American Art Museum

Depicting American Identity: Deception, Portraiture, and Charles Willson Peale

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My research will catalogue changes in portrait style in the Peale family's oeuvre up until the early 1830s, tracing an aesthetic chronology from the beginning of Charles Willson Peale's career in portraiture to those of his brother and sons. It is my hope that by following the aesthetic developments of this period, I can illuminate how the Peales' civic concerns manifested themselves as discernable shifts in the subjects, arrangements, inclusions, omissions, and compositional elements of the portraits that they painted. David C. Ward's recent book, *Charles Willson Peale: Art and Selfhood in the Early Republic*, has established Charles Willson Peale as a fundamentally important figure whose resonance as a writer, painter, and American thinker is as great as that of more prominent figures such as Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson. While Ward's book refers to Charles Willson Peale's autobiographical manuscript as "the longest museum label ever written," my project will explore how Peale's paintings might be read as visual manifestations of the concerns that he and his family outline in their writings. I wish to explore how discussions of deception, inclusion, exclusion, and ordinariness in the Peale Family Papers are also reflected in the Peales' portrait production. My project will examine how their civic principles converge in aesthetic representations of individuals, and will move beyond the question of how portraits represent the importance of specific individuals to further explore how portraits can contain and control social functions. The purpose of my research is to record and explain how portrait paintings of this time in Philadelphia embodied a type of specifically American identity that was intrinsically connected to public problems and social expectations.