

A REUNION OF IMAGES

Reassembling Peale's Vision

by Jodene K. Evans

“**I** AM VERY SORRY that you did not stop & see me when you were on here,” the letter began. “I could have told you so much better about these sketches than I can write you. They were taken by Mr. T.R. Peale who was Artist to Maj. Long’s Expedition up the Missouri River in 1819. The little landscape is the Camp of the Expedition named Engineer Cantonement. It was very near the present sight of Council Bluffs. The likeness[es] of the [Omahas] & Ottoes speak for themselves. I have duplicates something like these & I am sure that you and I are the only ones that have a sketch of the situation of Council Bluffs as it was in the year 1819. I took these sketches from Mr. Peale’s Sketch Book to send to you as I thought as you lived near Council Bluffs you would take much interest in them, as I hope you will.”

This letter was dated October 1, 1915, and signed by John M. Hoffmire of New Jersey. Hoffmire was the nephew of Lucinda (MacMullen) Peale, the second wife of Titian

Ramsay Peale. The letter accompanied five sketches and one watercolor, all packaged in a handmade cardboard envelope addressed to James S. Callanan of Des Moines, Iowa. (We do not know the relationship between Hoffmire and Callanan.)

In one of those serendipitous occasions common to history professionals, I found these Peale images and Hoffmire’s letter in a large box, where they had been placed for safekeeping years ago. As museum registrar for the State Historical Society of Iowa, I had been sorting through material related to our museum collections when I came across this box, marked “Correspondence.” The box was temporarily stored in my office in early 1988, when the State Historical Society of Iowa moved its collections from our old, crowded building to our new facility on East Sixth and Locust.

Because hundreds of sketches by Titian Ramsay Peale are among the historical collections related to science at the American Philosophical Society (APS) in Philadelphia, I

Peale returned to the East Coast with 8 × 5 inch sketchbooks such as this one, filled with sketches of flora and fauna, landscapes, and Native Americans. Apparently at some point his wife’s nephew, John Hoffmire, tore several pages out of a sketchbook and dispersed them to various acquaintances, including Iowan James S. Callanan. (Photo courtesy Kenneth Haltman)



notified APS about our six images. By comparing watermarks, penciled notations in Hoffmire's handwriting, and subject matter (depictions of the cantonment, the deer, and the steamboat), we eventually determined that these six images had been removed from Peale's sketchbooks decades before the sketchbooks were acquired by APS.

MEANWHILE, Kenneth Haltman was researching Peale for his dissertation at Yale University. In 1989 Haltman had noted that Peale's sketchbooks were incomplete and that "at least twenty-four sheets have been visibly removed." With my permission, the APS informed Haltman about the six images here at the State Historical Society of Iowa. In my ensuing correspondence with Haltman, I sent him descriptions of the sketches and watercolor.

"It's exactly what I needed," Haltman wrote back. "I'm finding the John Hoffmire connection to be a more and more important one in explaining the present state of much of Peale's Long Expedition work, at the APS as well as in your collection and in one or two other places. What I haven't yet succeeded in doing is getting a deep sense of what motivated the man to deal with the sketches as he did, taking great care on the one hand to label them . . . and yet, as was standard practice I suppose in the early century, cutting them up, scattering them without record being kept, or apparently so."

Every historical object, document, and image has a story, or context, that connects it to people, places, purposes, and time periods. Curators, archivists, and librarians work to discover, record, and preserve that context, because knowing the story behind an item helps us understand its historical significance.

Hoffmire's letter to Callanan did provide context for this small set of Peale images. Without the letter or Hoffmire's penciled notations on the sketches, how would we have discovered that they were by Titian

Peale? Nevertheless, by generously sending these to his Iowa friend, Hoffmire unwittingly did a disservice to Peale by dispersing individual pages of the sketchbooks. He was eroding the context of Peale's larger body of work.

HISTORIANS know that questions of context — how, when, where, why, and by whom an item is created — are seldom completely answered. But each time these questions are asked, the search reveals more nuances and deepens our understanding of the past.

One of these nuances is a focus of Haltman's dissertation. As Haltman wrote in a 1989 article, "Recapturing a sense of Peale's sketchbooks as he originally kept them is important if we are to understand the true complexity of his achievement. Previous discussions of his artistic contributions to the Long Expedition, and of his compositional techniques in general, have reached a consensus based on Peale's finished or public works alone."

Just as Haltman has studied Peale's art to determine the order in which pieces were created, historians attempt to piece together seemingly random events, individuals, and objects to establish an accurate, contextual narrative that tells the story. When all or most of the pieces are available, we can trace the onset of an event, the actual event, and its aftermath. Actually, a historical account is seldom that seamless. When many of the facts surrounding an event or object are lost, gaps appear in the narrative.

The sketches torn out of the sketchbooks were certainly gaps in Peale's work. Individually, his sketches indicate his talent. Collectively, however, Peale's sketchbooks reveal his vision. Looking at the images in their original order and overall context, we perceive that vision. We also learn, as Haltman points out in this issue of *The Palimpsest*, that differences between Peale's sketches and his public work suggest that the artist had more than one vision of the West. □