Nicholas Miller November 13, 2022

History Painting, Prehistoric Subject: Charles Willson Peale's *Exhumation of the Mastodon*

At the turn of the nineteenth century, the United States was a new country, and its citizens were struggling to find a national identity separate from the English from whom they had recently won independence. Events like the Enlightenment and the American Revolution had been changing fundamental aspects of Western culture, and Americans sought to anchor themselves amidst the currents of change. When Charles Willson Peale, a well-known artist, entrepreneur, and museum curator, excavated and placed on display a fossilized mastodon skeleton, the identity of the then-unknown creature – dubbed the *incognitum*[1] – became a mystery of national interest. Peale's painting *The Exhumation of the Mastodon* (Figure 1) depicts its namesake with the reverence of a history painting, and illustrates how Americans saw the mastodon as a symbol of national identity which was connected to ancient, primal power, the wilderness of the Western frontier, and the scientific progress in the new country.

Europeans during the 18th century generally conceived of the Americas as inferior to Europe. The New World, they believed, lacked history compared to the Old World. Further, the animals in the Americas, which trend smaller than those in Europe, were seen as further proof of American inferiority.[2] Europeans believed that the very air in the New World was inferior, contributing not only to the diminution of its animals but also the weakening of the Westerners who colonized it.[3] Americans like Thomas Jefferson, of course, disagreed with these ideas, but

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[1] Paul Semonin, *American Monster: How the Nation's First Prehistoric Creature Became a Symbol of National Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 13.
[2] Ellis L. Yochelson, "Mr. Peale and His Mammoth Museum." *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 136, no. 4 (1992): 492, http://www.jstor.org/stable/986758.
[3] Semonin, *American Monster, 6.*

had little evidence to disprove them. He hoped to refute the idea of American degeneracy with proof of a large animal from the continent.[4]

American ideas about the new country were quite opposed to those of the Europeans. Elements of their burgeoning national identity were forming. Because so much of the continent was seen by Westerners as unsettled wilderness, Americans strongly associated themselves with the wild. Europeans were, to them, city dwellers, while the Americans were rugged frontiersmen[5]. Similarly, Americans associated themselves with political and intellectual progress. Cities in the United States also sought identities of their own, and Philadelphia was no exception. After failing to become a political center for the country, Philadelphia's leaders turned to the sciences as the city's focus.[6] Philadelphia became a hub for science in the States, providing a backdrop for Charles Willson Peale's museum-making endeavors.

Charles Willson Peale began his career as an itinerant portraitist, and the Philadelphia Museum began as a portrait gallery where he planned to display his work to potential patrons. This concept of the museum was short-lived, as Peale soon became interested in displaying the taxidermied remains of various animals.[7] A polymath by nature, Peale was curator, taxidermist, artist, promoter, and collector for his museum. Peale, like earlier naturalists of the time, felt that storing knowledge about nature and spreading it to the public was a virtuous undertaking.[8] His strong Christianity tied him to biblically-based but outdated views such as the Great Chain of Being, yet it also intensified his interest in placing God's creations on display. He began

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[4] Yochelson, "Mammoth Museum," 494.
[5] Semonin, *American Monster,* 13, 201.
[6] Christopher Brooks, "Charles Willson Peale: Painting and Natural History in Eighteenth-Century North America." Oxford Art Journal 5, no. 1 (1982): 37. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1360102.
[7] E. P. Richardson, "Charles Willson Peale and His World." In *Charles Willson Peale and His World,* edited by Regina Ryan and Joanne Greenspun. 1st ed. (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1983), 80.
[8] Andrew B. Ross, "'Gratified in the Sight': Charles Willson Peale, the Philadelphia Museum, and the Object of Early American Happiness." *Early American Literature* 54, no. 3 (2019): 741–72. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26780572.

collecting and displaying specimens and his museum quickly became well-known. The Philadelphia Museum showed Philadelphians taxidermy specimens of animals from across the world, all arranged according to Linnaean taxonomy.[9] Peale's paintings framed the cases of taxidermy specimens, as is visible in his famous 1822 self portrait *The Artist in His Museum* (Figure 2). The people Peale painted were above the animals, both in the Great Chain of Being and in the museum's displays.[10] *The Artist in His Museum* also features the crown jewel of Peale's collection: the near-complete fossilized skeleton of an American mastodon.

The Claverack Tooth, a fossilized mastodon tooth discovered in 1705, begins the mystery of the American mastodon, referred to at the time as the *incognitum*.[11] The tooth, belonging to an animal no Americans had seen, simply could not fit in with how they viewed the world. Literal interpretations of the Bible dictated Western views: the hierarchy of the Great Chain of Being did not allow for either speciation or extinction[12], and the Earth was thought to be just six thousand years old. [13] Cotton Mather, an influential Puritan clergyman interested in natural science, recorded and asserted the interpretation of the tooth as a remnant of a biblical, antediluvian giant. The race of American giants, he wrote, was larger than all of the other biblical giants.[14] His interpretation provided a convenient explanation for the disappearance of the giants: they had been killed during the biblical Deluge. Mather's explanation of the tooth didn't go unchallenged, but it reflected the views of the majority of Americans at the time.

When Peale conducted the dig for his mastodon, interpretations of the Claverack tooth had become slightly more realistic but did not break free of the Chain. As Rembrandt Peale

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[9] Ross, "Gratified in the Sight," 760.
[10] Lillian B. Miller, "Charles Willson Peale as History Painter: The Exhumation of the Mastodon." American Art Journal 13, no. 1 (1981): 67. https://doi.org/10.2307/1594261.
[11] Semonin, *American Monster,* 15
[12] Ibid., 112
[13] Yochelson, "Mammoth Museum," 499.
[14] Semonin, *American Monster*, 34.

wrote, Mather's explanation of the tooth was "only worth preserving … as it fixes the time at which these extraordinary remains of antiquity were first discovered."[15] Naturalists such as Thomas Jefferson, who was a lifelong correspondent and friend to Peale, now believed that the tooth was from an American species of elephant. American elephants were thought to have been roaming the western part of the continent contemporaneously while the East Coast continued to be settled[16]. Although science had progressed, multiple major scientific developments that color the way modern Westerners see the world still hadn't occurred. Darwin's theories of evolution wouldn't be published for decades, nor would Lyell's principles of geology which held massive importance for paleontology. Naturalists at the time had very little basis to work from when interpreting fossils, but were eager to learn what they could.

In 1801, Charles Willson Peale was informed that some large fossils had been found in New York near the Hudson River. The fossils had been found by a farmer while digging a manure pit, and initial excavations had come to a halt after springs flooded the pit.[17] Always interested in expanding his museum's collections, Peale purchased both the fossils and the rights to search the area for more remains, immediately beginning preparations for an excavation.[18] Muddy water still submerged the dig site, necessitating the use of a drainage device of Peale's own design.[19] With financial help from the American Philosophical Society, Peale executed a careful paleontological dig – unlike, as he complained, the earlier dig conducted by the landowner[20] – and was rewarded, in the end, with two nearly-complete mastodon skeletons.

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[15] Rembrandt Peale. "Account of the Skeleton of the Mammoth," London, 1802, 1. https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/48915.
[16] Yochelson, "Mammoth Museum," 495.
[17] Peale, "Account of the Skeleton", 6.
[18] Charles Willson Peale to Thomas Jefferson, June 29, 1801, in *The Selected Papers of Charles Willson Peale and His Family*, Vol. 2, ed. Lillian B. Miller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988) (cited hereafter as *CWP Papers*), 338.
[19] Charles Willson Peale to Thomas Jefferson, October 11, 1801, in *CWP Papers,* 372.
[20] Charles Willson Peale to Thomas Jefferson, July 24, 1801, in *CWP Papers,* 372.

Although the Peales did not arrive at entirely correct interpretations about the mastodons – they mounted its tusks upside-down (Figure 3) and believed that the animals were carnivores[21] – the fossils served, in their eyes, as excellent evidence against American degeneracy.[22] In an effort to spread the news, one of the mastodon skeletons was sent to Europe, where it was met with a relative lack of interest.[23] Americans, however, came to the Philadelphia museum in droves to see the mastodon, purchasing more than enough tickets for Peale to recoup the costs of the excavation.[24]

Peale had essentially given up portraiture for the more lucrative museum business by 1801.[25] However, he never completely lost interest in painting, and his mastodon excavation provided ample inspiration for *The Exhumation of the Mastodon*. Peale began painting the *Exhumation* in 1806 and, from the start, intended to create a history painting.[26] As Lillian B. Miller, who has written extensively about the artist, describes, Peale saw his discovery as a "heroic drama" of "both human and cosmic significance."[27] The ancient fossils and the modern paleontology alike were related to Americans' ideas of their country; they saw the land as anciently, primally powerful, and themselves as scientifically, progressively modern. Peale reflected these sweeping ideas through the composition, posing, and dramatic colors of *The Exhumation of the Mastodon*.

The composition is dominated by the water wheel drainage device. The drainage device was a technological feat in itself; it was powerful enough to drain 1,440 gallons of water per hour.[28] Peale's water wheel was impressively powerful, yet relatively practical, aligning it both

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[21] Semonin, *American Monster,* 334-337.
[22] Ross, "Gratified in the Sight," 756.
[23] Yochelson, "Mammoth Museum," 501.
[24] Ibid., 503.
[25] Richardson, *CWP and His World,* 79-80.
[26] Charles Willson Peale to Rubens Peale, September 10, 1806, in *CWP Papers,* 982.
[27] Miller, "Charles Willson Peale as History Painter," 52.
[28] Charles Willson Peale in diary, September 92 1801, in *CWP Papers,* 359.

with Americans' appreciation for technological progress and rugged simplicity. Its structural logs anchor themselves in the painting as strong, stable components of the overall operation. They dominate the composition and lend it a pyramidal form which recalls earlier European tradition. Trees behind the device reconnect it to nature. Both the device and the trees draw the viewer's gaze to a foreboding sky. A channel through which water was drained into a nearby natural basin fades into the background, a landscape which is deemphasized by its lack of detail. The rim of the pit bisects the composition while dividing its subjects by physical and intellectual labor.[29]

In an 1807 letter to Benjamin West, Peale described the *Exhumation*.[30] The painting, he wrote, included more than 50 figures, eighteen of which are portraits. Most of the portraits are of members of Peale's large family, both to preserve their likenesses and to represent future generations' benefits from his work.[31] The family's posing echoes West's neoclassical masterpiece *Agrippina Landing at Brundisium*, which he painted during Peale's short stay at his studio in London.[32] Figures' poses are quite stiff – even the figures who are shoveling dirt or chopping wood seem almost frozen in place. Peale's statuesque posing hints at his admiration for Greco-Roman sculpture, sometimes clearly recalling specific works. Peale himself stands at the front of the family group with an arm outstretched, echoing the pose of the Apollo Belvedere, a cast of which was displayed at the Philadelphia Museum. The neoclassical elements of the painting assert the excavation as a historic event and, by extension, the work itself as a history painting.

The excavation was not only historic to Peale, but also dramatic. The relative restraint of drama in his neoclassical inspirations seem to have been insufficient for his vision of the

[29] Miller, "Charles Willson Peale as History Painter," 62.
[30] Charles Willson Peale to Benjamin West, December 16, 1807, in *CWP Papers*, 1054.
[31] Miller, "Charles Willson Peale as History Painter," 61.
[32] Ibid., 49.

painting. So, Peale heightened the drama in the work by emphasizing the approach of a thunderstorm in the background. The skies gradate from clear blue to dark, roiling stormclouds rife with Burkean sublimity. Peale and his workers are in a race against nature even as they recover evidence of its creations. They're dwarfed by the storm and by the creature they're exhuming, yet they press on with a determination that would make any contemporary American, with their appreciation for the rugged, proud. The very idea of the mastodon is sublime, with its then-incomprehensible anciency and the excitement surrounding it. Blending European 18th century neoclassicism with 19th century romanticism, which became popular in the States, while depicting a turn-of-the-century subject, Peale created a painting which asserts its place as an American history painting.

The Exhumation of the Mastodon reflects American progress, wilderness, and tradition. Its subject lends the painting a unique blend of themes which reflect both the scientific progress which was so important to Philadelphans of the era, as well as the ancient, wild megafauna of the continent and their contradiction of American degeneracy. However, it did not experience critical acclaim. Falling short of Peale's lofty goals, *The Exhumation of the Mastodon* was interpreted as a genre painting by late 19th and early 20th century art historians. With relatively little artwork to gain inspiration from in the United States, Peale couldn't borrow ideas like European artists, and struggled to combine the elements of history paintings into a cohesive whole.[33] Even the painting's failings were, in a sense, uniquely American.

[33] Ibid., 65.

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Yochelson, Ellis L. "Mr. Peale and His Mammoth Museum." *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 136, no. 4 (1992): 487-506. http://www.jstor.org/stable/986758. This article is an excellent overview of Peale's Philadelphia Museum and his mastodon skeletons. It takes a scientific approach to the historic events. Yochelson was a paleontologist who worked at the Smithsonian Institution's Museum of Natural History.

Ross, Andrew B. "'Gratified in the Sight': Charles Willson Peale, the Philadelphia Museum, and the Object of Early American Happiness." *Early American Literature* 54, no. 3 (2019): 741–72. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26780572. This article focuses on the museology of the Philadelphia Museum. It covers how Peale arranged taxidermy displays and, of course, how he displayed the mastodon. Ross is a post-doctoral researcher and instructor at the University of Delaware.

Miller, Lillian B. "Charles Willson Peale as History Painter: The Exhumation of the Mastodon." *American Art Journal* 13, no. 1 (1981): 47–68. https://doi.org/10.2307/1594261. This article is an interpretation of *The Exhumation of the Mastodon* as a history painting. It discusses background information and other artwork by Peale to provide more context. Miller was a historian known for her work on the Peale family.

Brooks, Christopher. "Charles Willson Peale: Painting and Natural History in Eighteenth-Century North America." *Oxford Art Journal* 5, no. 1 (1982): 31–39. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1360102. This article is a useful short overview of Charles Willson Peale as an artist. Brooks was a professor in the history department at Durham University.

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Peale, Charles Willson. *The Selected Papers of Charles Willson Peale and His Family,* Vol. 2, ed. Lillian B. Miller. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988. This is part of a large collection of papers, mostly letters sent or received by Charles Willson Peale. The volume includes much of the correspondence around the mastodon itself as well as the *Exhumation*.

Peale, Rembrandt. “Account of the Skeleton of the Mammoth.” London, 1802. https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/48915. This is a description by Rembrandt Peale of the mastodon(mammoth) itself as well as the dig for the bones. The Peales’ assumptions about the mastodon’s biology are recorded.

Illustrations

Figure 1. Charles Willson Peale, *The Exhumation of the Mastodon,* 1806.

Figure 2. Charles Willson Peale, *The Artist in his Museum,* 1822.

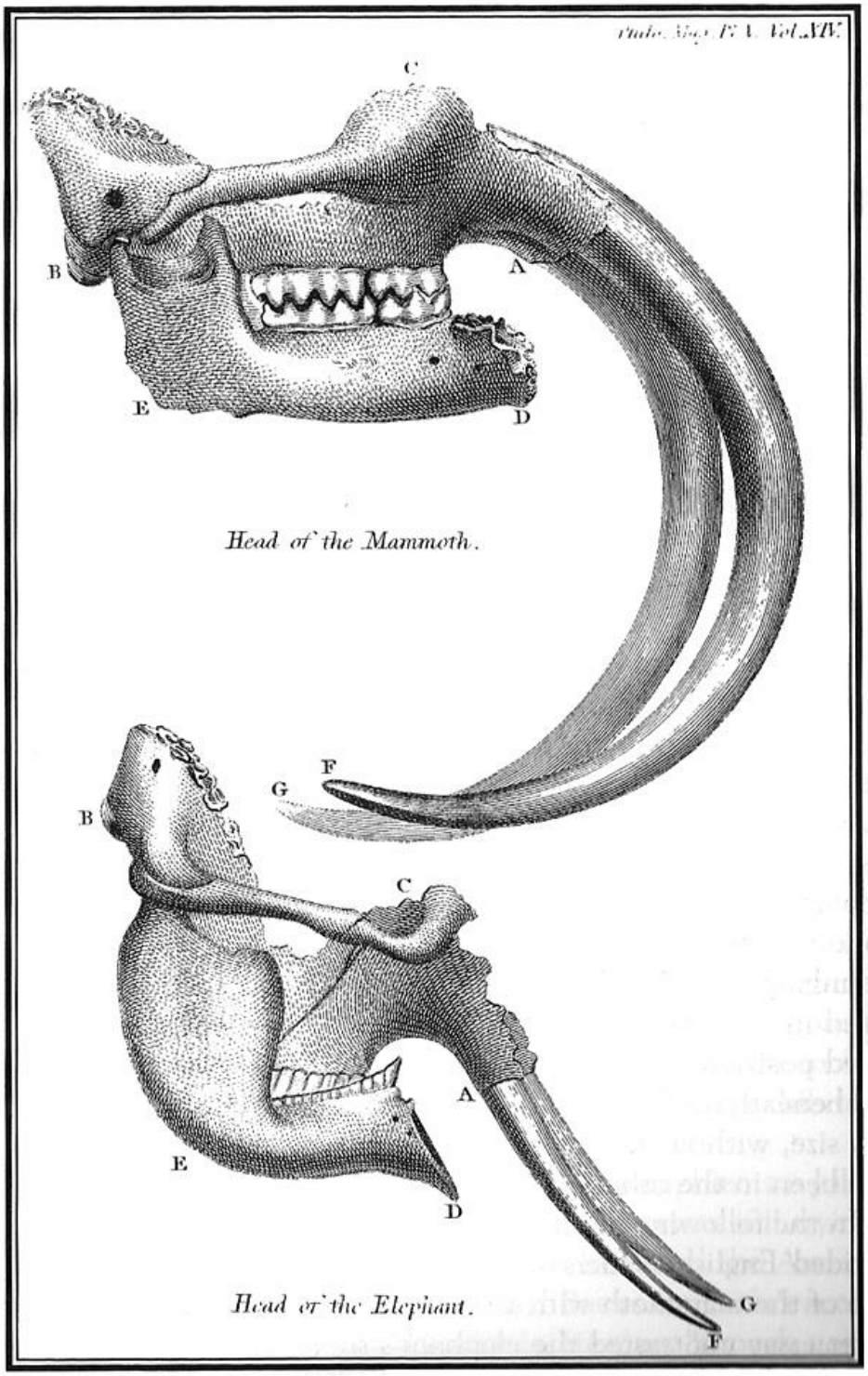

Figure 3. Rembrandt Peale, *Heads of the Mammoth and Elephant,* 1803.