

The Easel and the Eagle: Rembrandt Peale Views Napoleonic France

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In March of 1806, a young American, not yet thirty years of age, but endowed with remarkable powers of visual observation honed by professional training, sojourned in Paris, like many Americans before him, and many after.¹ Unlike most of his compatriots, he saw Napoleon I, Emperor of the French, up-close on at least three occasions, first at the theater, then during a troop review, and finally addressing the Legislative Assembly.² Witness his physical description of the man, sketched with the consciously attentive eye and visual memory of the artist: Napoleon was “a muscular man, of about five feet four inches, with very broad shoulders, and short legs. [...] He has small, piercing, deeply sunk, dark grey eyes, a prominent nose, a chin out of proportion large, a good mouth, short coal-black hair, [...] a countenance which denotes a man not too well pleased at any time, and easily made angry, and outrageously violent when he is so, with a complexion of bilious, sun-burnt, cadaverous sallowness, which baffles all description.”³ Based on historical descriptions, our

¹See my “Life Before Fodor and Frommer? Yesteryear Americans in Paris from Jefferson to John Quincy Adams,” *French History* 18 (Mar 2004) 25-49.

²Two other Americans left quite extensive accounts of their stay in Napoleonic France, one shortly before (Irving), one after Peale’s sojourn (Bayard). Only Bayard saw Napoleon of close, at a service in Notre Dame to which she had been able to procure an admission ticket. See my “Washington Irving in France: An Imagological and ‘Comparative Cohort’ Approach,” in *Selected Papers of the 2007 Consortium on the Revolutionary Era, 1750-1850*,” ed. Frederick C. Schneid and Jack R. Censer (High Point NC, 2008) 258-268; and “Maria Bayard in Napoleonic France: French Society, Early 19C Travel, and the Hundred Days as Witnessed by a Young American Woman Traveler,” in *Selected Papers of the 2008 Consortium on the Revolutionary Era, 1750-1850*,” eds. Frederick C. Schneid and John Severn (High Point NC, 2009) 280-294.

³ Rembrandt Peale, “Travels in France – For the Portfolio,” *The Portfolio* (Philadelphia, 1810) III, 87.

well-read observer surmised, he probably resembled Pepin the Short and Robert, eldest son of William the Conqueror, know as “courte hose.”

Yet our traveler’s powers of observation were not limited to the mere physical. Witness his acute assessment of Bonaparte’s intellectual and moral character. If encountered on a race-ground in America, our observer would have held him for a “bold rider through the woods, a skillful card player, and a good shot”; one who lived “chiefly by his ingenuity at cards, and ready to defend his winnings by the sword.” Napoleon doubtless had many natural abilities, to include education, health, courage, temperance, cold calculation and military brilliance; but these positive characteristics were largely outweighed by a poorly developed moral character, which was “restrained by no sense of propriety, and checked by no feelings of remorse.” Napoleon, he was convinced, was an extremely impatient and calculating man, “artful, selfish, arrogant, unfeeling, and inexorably vindictive.”⁴ Perhaps his worst character trait was a violent temper, which he apparently shared with the Roman emperor Valentinian, and which he often let loose rather than listening to the “dictates of reason and magnanimity.”⁵ Six years after penning this description, the young man would have completed two portraits of the Emperor.

Rembrandt Peale (22? February, 1778 – 4 October, 1860), author of the eloquent characterization, was an extremely popular American portraitist and history painter, widely acclaimed for his realism.⁶ Most celebrated for his

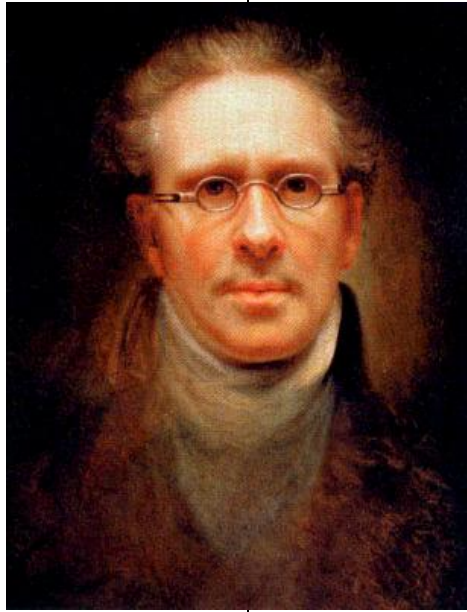
⁴ Peale 88.

⁵ Peale 97.

⁶The standard biographies are Carol E. Hevner, *Rembrandt Peale, 1778-1860: A Life in the Arts* (Philadelphia, 1985) and Lillian B. Miller, *Rembrandt Peale, 1778-1860: In Pursuit of Fame* (Washington, D.C., 1992). Basic biographical and bibliographical information can be found in the *American National Biography*, eds. John A. Garraty and Mark C. Carnes (24

likenesses of presidents Washington and Jefferson, he was the son of the famous *homo universalis* Charles Willson Peale (1741-1827), soldier, painter, naturalist, founder of the American Museum of Philadelphia of painting and natural history, and patriot during the American Revolution. Instructed in sketching and painting by his father, who also tutored him in the arts and sciences, Peale was otherwise largely self-taught, using prints and paintings of Philadelphia collections to study from. At age thirteen, he already produced a competent self-portrait; by 1795, age seventeen, he rendered a strong portrait from life of George Washington. As befitted a promising artist of his sophisticated background and education, he traveled to England during 1802-1803, primarily to exhibit a mastodon skeleton excavated by his family in New York, but also to study with Benjamin West and Washington Allston. In 1805, he became a founding member of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts.

Subsequently, his father commissioned him to do a series of portraits of famous contemporaries for his museum's "Gallery of Great Men," and funded several trips to Paris.⁷ Portraits completed read like a virtual Pantheon of French arts and sciences and included those of the sculptor Jean-Antoine Houdon, naturalist Georges Cuvier, writer Jacques-Henri Bernardin de St. Pierre, mineralogist René Just Haüy (the "Abbé Haüy"), physicist and inventor Sir Benjamin Thompson ("Count Rumford"), painter Jacques-Louis David, and Dominique Vivant (Baron de Denon) – diplomat,



vols., New York, 1999) and the older *Dictionary of American Biography*, (11 vols., New York, 1946-58). For his activities in Paris, from a specifically art-historical point of view, concentrating on Peale's study of French art, its impact on his later work, and his special interest for serious French portraiture (e.g. the work of David) see Lois M. Fink, "Rembrandt Peale in Paris," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, January 1986, 71-79.

⁷ Fink, op. cit.

author and first director of the Louvre Museum. The elder Peale's correspondence with Thomas Jefferson indicates that Rembrandt was also very much interested in taking advantage of the study opportunities offered by the Louvre – officially called the *Musée Napoléon* – containing over 1,000 major works classified and arranged by national schools, in chronological order; only three other national art museums were in fact accessible to the public at that time: those of Dresden, Amsterdam, and Florence.⁸

Peale's first, 1806, French trip – his published account of which shall constitute the focus of this article –, was cut short as he feared the European political situation in general, the on-going wars in particular, might prevent a safe return to his young family (he had married in 1798, his wife born five children by 1809). In March of the year, having stayed in Paris for an indeterminate amount of time – most likely no more than a month or two – he departed the capital for Nantes, following the post-road by way of Etampes, Angerville, Orléans, Blois, Amboise, Tours, Saumur, and Angers. He remained in Nantes until his final departure, experiencing "the kindness and hospitality of two or three families whom I shall always think of with gratitude," due to his impeccable letters of recommendation.⁹ On 17 April, 1806, Peale embarked at Paimboeuf on board an American vessel bound for New York.

Peale was again to travel to France during June – September, 1808, this time on his father's commission. He was probably also encouraged in his Parisian studies by Robert Fulton, whom he had met in 1807. The American inventor and painter had himself previously been to Paris in an unsuccessful attempt to sell his submarine to Napoleon.¹⁰ Back in the Louvre, Peale focused his studies on the works of Rubens, Raphael, Titian, Van Dyck, Correggio, Veronese. He also much admired and was influenced by the French

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Peale 417.

¹⁰ Fink, op. cit.

contemporaries Jacques-Louis David, François Gérard, and Robert Lefèvre. Having completed seven portraits for his father's museum (cf. supra), while in Paris, on his return to America, the elder Peale commissioned him to do another fifty.

A third trip to France was undertaken from October, 1809 – November, 1810. During this trip, he was accompanied by his wife Eleanor and five children, of whom three went to school while abroad. Peale expanded his technique, painted the naturalist Alexander von Humboldt, chemist/physicist Joseph Louis Gay-Lussac, botanist François André Michaux, and was inspired to transcend portraiture and move into history painting, which dramatically influenced the next fifteen years of his career. After his return to the United States, Peale in 1811 completed the large canvas "Napoleon on Horseback" – soon exhibited both in Baltimore and Philadelphia – but since lost, and in 1812 a half-profile portrait of the Emperor based solely on sketches made when Napoleon appeared in public, since he consistently refused to sit for a portrait.¹¹

During his several sojourns in Paris, Peale developed a strong interest in the painting of both historical and literary subjects, these clearly constituting the premier contemporary French artistic genres – and both Benjamin West and John Vanderlyn had previously encouraged him in that direction. He moved in top artistic circles, i.e. working alongside Vanderlyn in the latter's Paris studio. Peale enthusiastically – perhaps enviously – noted the great recognition provided artists in French society at large, above all by the successor to the defunct royal academies, the *Institut National de France*, at which he attended an award ceremony, which dazzled him with the prizes in painting that ranged from 5,000 to 100,000 FF. This was unheard of in America, with its indifferent public and uncertain patronage.¹² Peale almost exhibited at the salons of 1808 and 1810, to which he would have gained easy admittance, given his

top-notch social connections, but he on both occasions broke off his stay early, for personal reasons. Still, the Paris period and following decade are considered the high point in his painting career. Indeed, art historian Lois Fink persuasively argued the influence of Paris on his later work, citing his literary female painting *The Roman Daughter* (1812) and the allegorical *Court of Death* (1820) as cases in point. Its impact was also evident during the 1820s, when Peale's portraiture crossed over into history painting, as especially visible in his several renderings of George Washington, and other historical figures. Indeed, his most famous Washington portrait, the *Pater Patriae* of 1823, was indebted to none other than Houdon, as Peale himself conceded.¹³

"Travels in France – For the Portfolio" – Source and Method

My concern, however, is not for Peale's better-known second and third trips, highly significant to art historians due to their resulting output and undeniable impact on the artist's subsequent career. I propose rather to examine his first voyage, equally significant, but for other reasons. First, his biographers – Carol E. Hevner and Lillian B. Miller – have neglected Peale's published account, most likely because of its lack of relevance to his artistic career, and because the author himself chose to write about society and politics, and not about the arts as such.¹⁴ The art historian's loss, in this case, is the historian's gain. For Peale's disquisitions, as those of an intelligent, broadly educated and astute observer, constitute precisely the interest of the

¹³ Fink, op. cit.

¹⁴ Miller, in *In Pursuit of Fame*, devoted all of Chapter 5 ("Paris at Last, 1808-1810") to Peale's second and third Paris trips, focusing almost exclusively on the painter's professional artistic aspects and activities. The preceding chapter, "On the Road Again, 1804-1807," details various professionally motivated journeys in America, but fails to note Peale's first Paris trip. Was she not aware of his letters in *The Portfolio*? This would appear unlikely, since she did draw upon those published in the succeeding volume, concerning his later trip(s) to Paris: "Original Letters from Paris, Addressed by Rembrandt Peale to C.W. Peale, and Rubens Peale." *The Portfolio IV* (September): 275-279. The clear lack of artistic interest of the earlier letters probably explains the omission.

¹¹ The portrait, oil on canvas, measuring 27½ x 21½ inches, was auctioned by Sotheby's on March 1, 2006, as lot 35, and sold for \$24,000. Source: Artvalue.com <http://www.artvalue.com/auctionresult--peale-rembrandt-1778-1860-usa-portrait-of-napoleon-bonaparte-1854530.htm>. [accessed May 25, 2011]

¹² Fink, 87.

historian aiming to gauge American travelers' views of the period. Secondly, Peale's account numbers among those published contemporaneously, thereby reaching a broader public and exercising a more significant impact on public opinion than unpublished accounts or private letters.

Peale's account took the form of a series of six letters "to his daughter," amounting to some 76 printed pages, roughly in A5 format. They appeared in the highly respected first monthly American journal of liberal arts, applied sciences, and polite literature, *The Portfolio*, in 1810.¹⁵ The first letter, undated, was written in Paris; the second, dated March (1806), in Nantes; the third through the fifth, undated, in Nantes; and the last, presumably written during or shortly after his voyage home, dated 20 July, 1806, Newport, Rhode Island. The first is devoted exclusively to French drama, the Parisian theatrical and operatic scene, and a comparison between the French and English stage; the second to Napoleon the man, the leader, the historical figure; the third to Parisian society, the French economy, culture and the French Revolution; the fourth and fifth mainly to the journey from Paris to Nantes – travel and tourism; and the last to Nantes, its environs, the Vendée revolt and the passage home to New York. My primary concern shall be the second, on Napoleon.

Peale's account is situated at the intersection of two classical 18th and 19th-century literary genres: the letter or epistolary travel account, and the travel account as such.¹⁶ The form he chose was that of the former, the method that of the latter. Whilst composing his letters, he used his journal and various notes kept during his sojourn, or jotted

down while on the road, as an *aide-mémoire*.¹⁷ In addition, he frequently retraced his itinerary on a map of France, noting the remarkable geographical features en route. True to the frequently literary aspirations of the travel account, popular as it was amongst the reading public who could not afford their own Grand Tour, as also amongst those who could – and who often took best-selling accounts along during their journey, as did Peale – he sought to lend his letters the requisite *gravitas* of erudition, e.g. by inserting historical digressions on places visited. Thus, he frequently made use of various contemporary sources, i.a. other travel accounts (notably Arthur Young's famous *Travels in France*),¹⁸ general and local guidebooks and histories, and classical ancient and modern European histories, typically for the period with neither attribution nor apology, e.g. on the Vendée war: "It was a melancholy sight, says the author I copy from [...]"¹⁹ Young as an intelligent observer appears to have been Peale's model, for he often singles the Englishman out for praise, referring the reader back to Young to flesh out missing topics not discussed by Peale himself, who was in fact reading the *Travels* on the road from Paris to Orléans.²⁰

Peale not surprisingly, given his singular education, appears well-read in the classics, as well as classical and contemporary English literature and history, as indicated by his frequent references to Cicero, Plutarch, Shakespeare, Gibbon (quite extensively), Pope, Johnson, Milton, Hume, and Young (again extensively). In addition to establishing his credentials for the reader, however, Peale's purpose is often to make points of historical comparison regarding his observations on French contemporary history, e.g. comparing Napoleon's return to France from Egypt, after the battle of Aboukir, with Xerxes' return home after Salamis. Thus, he draws mainly on classical Greek and Roman history, as also on English history of the 17th and 18th centuries for historical comparisons (e.g.

¹⁵Rembrandt Peale, "Travels in France – For the Portfolio," *The Portfolio*, Vol. III, pps. 14-24, 87-101, 188-198, 292-300, 402-419, 453-464. Philadelphia: Bradford & Inskeep; New York: Inskeep & Bradford, 1810.

¹⁶The standard introduction to the historical-critical evaluation of travel accounts of all genres is Antoni Maćzak and Hans Jürgen Teuteberg (eds.), *Reiseberichte als Quellen europäischer Kulturgeschichte: Aufgaben und Möglichkeiten der historischen Reiseforschung* (Wolfenbüttel: Herzog August Bibliothek: 1982.). The current leading society on travel studies is the *International Society for Travel Writing*. The society's home page is located at: <http://istw-travel.org/>.

¹⁷ Peale 87, 419, 454.

¹⁸Arthur Young, *Travels during the years 1787, 1788, & 1789, undertaken more particularly with a view of ascertaining the cultivation, wealth, resources, and national prosperity of the kingdom of France*, 2nd ed. (London, 1794).

¹⁹ Peale 456.

²⁰ Ibid., 295.

comparing Napoleon to Monck or Cromwell). Peale justifies this approach by noting that "The best maxims for the government of human life might surely be derived from history."²¹

Peale included extensive French quotations throughout, demonstrating his knowledge of the language. Indeed, he appears to have been quite well-read in French literature, referring to over a dozen 17th and 18th-century authors, indicating a preference for Racine, Corneille, Molière, Crébillon and of course Voltaire (the only *philosophe* mentioned!), not least due to the latter's well-known Anglophilia. True to his polymath parentage, he was a reader of the *Encyclopédie*. As regards contemporary politics on the ground, he seems to have read the *Moniteur* regularly, attended a meeting of the *Corps Législatif*, and a review of troops by Napoleon in Paris. Not having witnessed the French Revolution firsthand, as an American citizen, it could not fail but attract his attention as the epoch-making phenomenon it was.²² And so he frequently made comparisons between the revolutionary and Napoleonic periods, basing himself on what he had been able to learn of the former, frequently through discussions with informed contemporaries he interrogated on the subject, and personal observation of the latter.²³

Peale the Traveler

²¹ Ibid., 403.

²²Both American eyewitnesses of the revolution itself, as also those that traveled in France after 1799, understood the historical significance of the phenomenon and assessed it, influenced by various parameters, to include period of observation, extent of violence witnessed, to a lesser degree American partisan affiliation, and American exceptionalism as a determining ideological benchmark. See my "Aspects of the French Revolution as Viewed by American Travelers," *La Révolution Française et la Flandre*, eds. Jan Craeybeckx and Franz Scheelings (Brussels, 1990) 71-99; and "Yankees Visit the European Home of Liberty: Revolutionary Politics As Experienced by American Travelers, 1780-1815," *The Consortium on Revolutionary Europe, 1750-1850. Selected Papers*, 1998, eds. Kyle O. Eidahl and Donald D. Horward (Tallahassee FL, 1999) 53-70.

²³For a recent discussion of how American eyewitnesses at large perceived the relationship between revolutionary and Napoleonic France, see my "Yankee Observers, Napoleon, and American Exceptionalism," *Revue Napoleonica* Nr. 10, 2011/1: 23-48.

While Peale's letters do not include account notes or overt references to his manner of traveling, several indicators suggest he traveled in comfort, comparable to his upper-middle class compatriots. This meant traveling on the post-road by private or hired coach, as against the *diligence*, used by *hoi polloi*, and lodging at quality inns and hotels. Peale benefitted from an excellent *bona fides* in France, arriving, as he did, with letters of introduction to men of the arts and sciences from his eminent father, as well as from President Jefferson, from whom he even received a special passport. He already knew sufficient French on arrival to converse freely, and the list of men he painted indicates his wealth of contacts and the *entrée* given by the quality recommendations.²⁴ Prominent Americans he visited in France included minister plenipotentiary John Armstrong (1758-1843, minister to France, 1804-1810) and the family of Bostonian James Bowdoin III (1752-1811). Appointed minister to Spain, Bowdoin had been detained in Paris to negotiate boundary issues, and never took up his Madrid post in the end, returning to the United States in 1808. In Nantes, Peale befriended the American consul, William Patterson (1803-1815), also making the acquaintance of "several young Americans [...] chiefly from the southern states."²⁵

Given the more literary nature of his account, and Peale's focus on culture, society, the economy and politics, he does not devote much space to the everyday realities of travel such as road conditions, prices, meals, travel by post, postillions, inns and hotels, and the like. Generally quite happy with conditions, he praised the roads and the quality of lodgings, repeatedly noting that one ate well in France. For greater detail, however, one must turn to journals, letters and account books, rather than published literary accounts.²⁶ His approach to

²⁴ Fink, op. cit.

²⁵ Peale 198.

²⁶For a detailed account based on American travel accounts extant, see my "On the Road Again: The Material Realities of French Overland Travel in American Revolutionary and Napoleonic Travel Accounts," in Conference Proceedings *Things that Move: The Material Worlds of Tourism and Travel*, 19-23 July, 2007, Centre for Tourism and Cultural Change, Leeds

sightseeing, however, is illuminating, as it typifies that of the educated 19th-century American traveler and, indeed, distinguishes him from his 21st-century compatriots.²⁷ Peale visited castles and churches as tourists of all ages have, but also took great interest in agriculture, e.g. noting the state of cultivation of the region he traveled through,²⁸ in emulation of Arthur Young. His interest in commerce and industry has already been noted. Finally, like many American contemporaries, he was fascinated by new technologies, especially in the sectors of infrastructure and industrial processes, like Gouverneur Morris or Thomas Jefferson, to name two prominent examples.²⁹ Thus, he described in detail the system of dykes constructed for land reclamation near Nantes, also noting the local production of salt, referring the reader to an in-depth description of the process in the *Encyclopédie*; his interest was especially captured by the up to three-mile-long canals constructed to carry the salt water inland to the flats.³⁰ Near Orléans, Peale described an innovative system of quarry mine shafts, he had previously read about in Young, and which he visited, noting how the blocks of stone were raised by a wheel worked by horses – which he then proceeded to compare to a tin mine shaft on the coast of Cornwall, sunk in the sea itself, but kept dry by a large steam engine driven pump on the coast itself.³¹

Of recreational activities in Paris Peale writes little, with a notable exception: theater and opera, of which he was a devoted aficionado,

Metropolitan University, United Kingdom.

²⁷American attitudes towards tourism in France during the period are discussed in my “From Romanticism to Realism: American Tourists in Revolutionary France,” *The Consortium on Revolutionary Europe, 1750-1850. Selected Papers, 2000*, eds. Donald D. Howard, Michael F. Pavkovic and John K. Severn (Tallahassee FL, 2002) 40-54.

²⁸E.g. Peale 299 and 402.

²⁹Jefferson constitutes a remarkable case study in comparison with his compatriots. See my “Thomas Jefferson in France: An Imagological and ‘Comparative Cohort’ Approach,” *Selected Papers of the 2006 Consortium on the Revolutionary Era, 1750-1850*,” eds. Frederick C. Schneid and Denise Z. Davidson (High Point U: High Point, North Carolina, 2007) 32-42.

³⁰Peale 455.

³¹*Ibid.*, 296.

attending performances repeatedly during his stay, as evident in his very first letter. As he put it, “The theatre has afforded us a great deal of amusement during our stay here [...]”³² Like most compatriots before him, he distinguished between the “better” houses, especially the *Théâtre Français*, and those which catered rather to the tastes of the populace, which he avoided.³³ Unlike many compatriots, he did not deplore the perceived “licentiousness” of “undress” in the French ballet, simply noting, without moral comment, that the “exposure of the person in the female dancers which admits of no description.”³⁴ His comparative commentary on French and English theater is quite sophisticated. It was at the theater that he first saw Napoleon.

Napoleon

Peale concluded his first letter with the statement that Napoleon was “so great a man” that he deserved a full letter,³⁵ and consequently devoted his complete second letter to the man, his policies, and anticipated historical legacy. In addition to a basic biographical sketch,³⁶ included for the reader’s convenience, Peale elaborated somewhat on the physical appearance and character sketch quoted earlier, as regards the Emperor’s communication skills, maintaining that from what he had read and heard first-hand,

³²*Ibid.*, 24.

³³Americans tended to be avid visitors to theater, opera, ballet, though with varying degrees of sophistication. See my “Life Before Fodor and Frommer? Yesteryear Americans in Paris from Jefferson to John Quincy Adams,” *French History* 18 (Mar 2004) 25-49.

³⁴Peale 23. Indeed, most Americans condemned the French for their perceived immorality, as evident in theatrical “undress,” nudity in the arts, indecorous behavior of women, and fashion unbecoming. This perception entered into an enduring American national stereotype of the French, which was, during the revolution and under Napoleon, even extrapolated as a part of French *political* immaturity. See my “‘Straight’ Sam Meets ‘Lewd’ Louis. American Perceptions of French Sexuality, 1775-1815.” *Revolutions & Watersheds: Transatlantic Dialogues, 1775-1815*, eds. W.M. Verhoeven, Beth Dolan Kautz (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999) (*DQR Studies in Literature* 26: 61-86).

³⁵Peale 24.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 89-92.

Bonaparte's written grammar, spelling and style were poor, and his speeches lacking in eloquence.³⁷ Peale had heard him address the *Corps législatif* and was not impressed by the delivery. The speech was read straight off the paper, and that with difficulty, with no eye contact whatsoever with his audience. Peale found this in contradiction to all that he had heard about Napoleon's behavior on the field of battle. Indeed, a few days previously, he had witnessed a troop review and parade, during which the Emperor's verbal skills impressed him much more favorably. It would appear, Peale implied, that Bonaparte was more at ease with his soldiers than in the Assembly.³⁸

In his evaluation of Napoleon the statesman, Peale attempted a balanced assessment, applying the fundamental liberal principles of his own country's revolution as a yardstick. Thus, he followed the approach of most of his compatriots in France during the period. In domestic policy, there was clear room for praise. The imperial government was characterized by an "impartial" administration³⁹ and a "uniform and regular administration of justice,"⁴⁰ based on a generally praiseworthy Civil Code singled out, remarkably, for its abolition of the "scandalous abuses of the republican law of divorce."⁴¹ The Emperor was further praised for the renewed protection and encouragement of religion in France, after the excesses of his predecessors.⁴² He had also restored the "natural" deference owed the propertied classes, so that the rich were finally "admitted to the rank and estimation which wealth ought in reason and good policy to give."⁴³ In the area of public morals, too, Napoleon had restored order, as evident in the theater, which during the revolution had had its morality "diminished," in particular through the "public ridicule" of the "distinctions of society." The Emperor's "well-regulated police," thankfully, whose presence was felt at the theater, had much reduced such outgrowths of

revolutionary manners.⁴⁴

Yet there was considerable room for censure. Peale, as we have seen, was educated at home by a polymath wishing to instill in his son the Renaissance ideals of the liberal arts, an American patriot in the tradition of the "virtuous citizen." Small wonder then, that the Napoleonic reform of the *lycée*, aimed at creating obedient Frenchmen with all the technical qualifications necessary for the officers' corps or the elite *Grandes Ecoles* of civil engineering, was one of Peale's prime targets for critique. First off, the liberal arts had suffered such that literature was entering into a dramatic decline.

*There are chymists, botanists, astronomers, natural historians, and above all, civil and military engineers; but there is no prospect of another literary generation, like that of the last years of the monarchy, for there are no similar means of education; the colleges and academies of those times have disappeared; the central schools which might have diffused some knowledge among the people at large, have each of them been converted into a lycaeum, the internal constitution of which is entirely military.*⁴⁵

Even worse, the *lycées'* fundamental curriculum catered more and more to the needs of the army.

*Boys who are taught very little Latin, who have a great deal of mathematics, and only now and then of geography, and arithmetic; who learn nothing of religion, history, or moral philosophy, and acquire no modern language but their own; who are divided into companies, have their officers, wear a uniform, assemble by beat of drum, and go through the manual exercise as regularly as in a garrison; who live coarsely, and without any attention being paid to their morals in private, who are punished for offences against the discipline of the school by imprisonment within the bare walls, and upon the naked floor of a dungeon; such boys, I say, will scarcely be fit for anything but a military life.*⁴⁶

In fact, Peale maintained, wherever you looked, in government or society at large, the militarization

³⁷ Ibid., 97.

³⁸ Peale 99-100.

³⁹ Peale 93.

⁴⁰ Peale 407.

⁴¹ Peale 93.

⁴² Peale 93.

⁴³ Peale 191.

⁴⁴ Peale 18. Cf. also 20.

⁴⁵ Peale 194.

⁴⁶ Peale 194.

of France had advanced to such an extent that “the whole nation rapidly assumes the appearance of a great military establishment.”⁴⁷

The government as a whole was “arbitrary and despotic.”⁴⁸ Although, to be just, Peale noted that “arbitrary power” had by 1806 become a “necessary evil” to maintain stability and order, and if it had to be suffered, Napoleon was the best man for the job.⁴⁹ In the event, even the otherwise laudable Civil Code had an imprint of despotism on it, for it had abolished trial by jury, leaving the verdict solely in the hands of the magistrate.⁵⁰ The press had been shackled,⁵¹ and since free politics had been suppressed, real political and literary discourse in the once fashionable salons was dying out. In fact, Peale contended, even the Ancien Régime’s infamous *lettres de cachet* and the threat of incarceration in the Bastille had allowed a more liberal discourse than the Napoleonic regime permitted.⁵²

The economy, as well, was in a shambles, Peale maintained, and the leadership was responsible, for Napoleon was poorly informed in economic matters, in particular finance, trade and industry.⁵³ While France as a nation benefitted from bountiful natural “advantages,” with which it was endowed more than “almost every other country in the world,” his policies both domestic and foreign contrived to ruin her economy.⁵⁴ The taxation of landholders was “exorbitant,” and Peale cited cumulative rates of “upwards of thirty-three per cent,” all told.⁵⁵ Speaking with the merchants of Nantes, with whom he presumably made contact through his friend the American consul, he concluded that they also suffered greatly under the excessive tax burden and the loss of business, both occasioned by the ongoing war.⁵⁶ If property and trade suffered, so did industry. Traveling from Paris to Nantes, he noted, in Anjou, “the remains of

their once flourishing manufactories.”⁵⁷ “All that heaven has ever bestowed upon man was once to be enjoyed in this fine country,” he wrote of France as a whole, “But their manufactories, which formed a principle source of their prosperity, have gone to decay [...]”⁵⁸ At the same time, the strict French customs regime targeting England – precursor of the Europe-wide Continental System installed later that year – did not prevent the entrance of British manufactured goods. English fabrics were very much en vogue, especially “kersimere and velverets from Manchester” for the men, while women also held English products much in favor, and these were all to be had and openly sold in spite of the ongoing Anglo-French economic war.⁵⁹ Indeed, “prohibited articles, are openly sold in large warehouses,” and Peale assumed that the “smuggler” or “vendor” had an arrangement with the imperial customs agents, allowing the government to cynically draw its benefit from “what it cannot possibly prevent.”⁶⁰ He concluded that the two prime causes of the failure of the system were the French government’s likely collusion with smugglers or vendors to raise revenue, and the fact that, even with the added cost, illicitly imported items were still cheaper than if produced locally, in spite of the low cost of French labor compared to that of England.⁶¹ How then, Peale asked, could Napoleon maintain a hold on the French? His answer was dual: First, because of the Emperor’s success on the battlefield and the consequent restoration of French national glory; second, because life in France under the Convention and the Directory had been even worse than during the Empire.

Soon after 18 Brumaire, the nation had placed great hopes in the “gallant soldier,” who had already begun to lead French arms back to their previous glory.⁶² Peale conceded that Napoleon

⁴⁷ Peale 195.

⁴⁸ Peale 97.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 93.

⁵⁰ Ibid.,

⁵¹ Ibid., 195.

⁵² Ibid., 191.

⁵³ Ibid., 94.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 189.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 408.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 418.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 411; cf. also 404.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 405.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 189.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., 92. Peale had a dim view of the French navy, which could not compare in quality to the army. His analysis was penetrating: The sailors were undisciplined, underpaid, poorly cared for, sensitive of their inferiority vis-à-vis the British, and therefore cowardly. A structural reason for their inferiority was

was indeed very able in the conduct of foreign affairs, though this was usually not the product of a “fair” or “liberal” policy, i.e. lacking in moral character.⁶³ His reputation having largely been established on the merit of the Italian campaign of 1797, Peale reminded readers not to forget the price paid by the occupied. Napoleon had arrived with “the sword in one hand, and poison in the other,” and deluded the Italians into “dreams of liberty and independence which it could never have been his intention to realize ...”⁶⁴ In other words, liberty had been served up on the point of a bayonet. But this was an American’s, not a Frenchman’s perspective. From Peale’s vantage point in 1806 – he was writing after Austerlitz, but before Jena and Auerstädt – the French were already hypnotized by Napoleon’s brilliant military successes so far, and his patent defeats (Peale cited Egypt and St. Domingo) made little impression on the public.⁶⁵ Even the peasantry, who of course suffered most from the unpopular conscription, tended to overlook its negative effects as long as the military couriers kept returning with tidings of new victories.⁶⁶ Outside of France, as well, Napoleon would be historically remembered for his military achievements, viz. the crossing of the Alps, his “inroad” into Germany and the glory of Austerlitz.⁶⁷ Still, the Emperor’s hold over his own people, founded on battlefield success, was tenuous, since “a single defeat of a French army however commanded by the emperor in person might put an end to all this enthusiasm and cure them of their delirium.”⁶⁸ This even extended to the army itself, Peale believed, for while the French soldiers were “unquestionably among the best [...] in Europe,” he doubted their support would continue in the event of a defeat of the emperor who “is not personally beloved as Henry IV was.”⁶⁹

The second, exclusively domestic reason

the small size of the French merchant marine, thus providing a limited training-ground for future naval sailors. (462-463)

⁶³ Ibid., 93.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 90-91.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 93-94.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 408.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 93.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 408.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 462.

Napoleon was able to maintain a hold over the French, Peale thought – very much in line with his compatriots in the country – , was the fact that he had restored order from the chaos wrought by the Terror and the bungling of the Directors. True, his acquisition of power had been a clear violation of the constitution, but his predecessors in power had been a “race of inferior lawyers” and “unprincipled unqualified men” who had oppressed the people, who now “hoped for a more equitable and lenient government in the hands of a gallant soldier.”⁷⁰ A case in point was the Vendée – a disaster for France, “this worst of all civil wars” and a product of the “despotism of Robespierre.”⁷¹ Refraining from describing in detail for his delicate readers the infamous *noyades*, he limited himself to noting that “as far as I could learn from persons who were at Nantes during those wretched times, there does not appear to be any exaggeration in the printed accounts.”⁷² Of Jean-Baptiste Carrier, instigator of the dreadful drownings, he wrote, “Whilst the inhabitants of Nantes were thus suffering [...] Carrier, a man of profligate life, and violent passions, insulted the public misery by scenes of riot and debauchery. [...] the whole city [...] was thus a prey to the most worthless of mankind.”⁷³ François Athanase de Charette de la Contrie (known simply as “Charette”), leader of the revolt, in contrast, he compared favorably with the Roman statesman and general Sertorius.⁷⁴ Whilst in Nantes, Peale interviewed several survivors of the revolt about their experience, and their consequent perception of the Napoleonic regime. This led him to conclude that “it is the memory of those dismal times which gives to the present government its principal support, for there is nothing which a great majority would not submit to, rather than risk a renewal of them [...]”⁷⁵ Peale’s own opinion of

⁷⁰ Ibid., 92.

⁷¹ Ibid., 456.

⁷² Ibid., 415.

⁷³ Ibid., 416.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 457.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 418. Clearly influenced by his interlocutors, Peale characterized the Vendéens in rather idealized terms, as noble rebels against tyranny: “[...] the people of La Vendée [...] were faithful, temperate, and obedient, and even merciful to their enemies taken in war, till the atrocious cruelties of the republicans provoked them to retaliation. They never deserted, and when taken, it was

the radical period of the French Revolution was equally damning, specifically targeting its perceived immorality, loss of religion, and rampant inflation – all of which he explained through the ascendancy of “the mob.”

There may be some exaggeration in what we are told of the depravity of manners in Paris during a considerable period of the revolution; but it must still have been very great, for the mob were of too much importance not to be courted by the different parties, and we may easily conceive of what nature the means of seduction were; every licentious passion was gratified by the facility of procuring a divorce, the restraint of religion was withdrawn, [...] joined to the depreciation of money, and the fluctuation of property must have encouraged idleness and debauchery in the extreme [...] ⁷⁶

Small wonder, then, that he considered Napoleon’s “arbitrary power” a “necessary evil” to hold in check the passions of that “mob.” Peale’s sole positive comment on the impact of the Revolution is when he notes the salutary effects of the abolition of the feudal regime, including the *taille* and *gabelle*, on the general livelihood of the peasantry. ⁷⁷

In sum, Peale’s assessment of the Emperor tended more towards the negative. He had made it his policy to keep France constantly at war, which “gratified their [i.e. the French’s] military genius,” while giving him the opportunity for settling his “needy followers and relatives” with prime European property. ⁷⁸ He had, truth be told, restored order, but he had failed, in spite of his victories, to truly unify the nation or gain the sincere love of the people. He was distrusted and hated by Royalists and Republicans alike, so that even those “who are indifferent to the form of government, and would sacrifice a great deal for domestic security, complain bitterly of taxes, and groan under the loss of their children by the

very seldom that anyone would accept life on condition of crying vive la republique.” (458) At the same time, he professed an awareness that various accounts of the Vendée revolt were colored by partisan spirit, but all tended to agree in condemning the extent of physical destruction and human atrocity. (459)

⁷⁶ Ibid., 189-190.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 407-408.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 93.

conscription.” ⁷⁹

True to his American roots, then, and following the conservative interpretation of the prevalent ideology of American exceptionalism, Peale the commentator on Napoleonic – and, by extension, revolutionary – France, emerges as a social and cultural liberal, accepting class distinctions and their public display, as is evident, e.g., in his disquisition on the evolution of fashion in France, since the revolution, noting with clear approbation that “good manners are the outworks of that sort of morality, which is essential to order and obedience.” ⁸⁰ Peale was no Jacksonian and would have abhorred any “glorification” of the common man. Thus, he repeatedly condemned the social and economic egalitarianism of the Revolution when it tended to level social distinctions. Looking back on the unfortunate religious policy of the revolution, which Napoleon had at least partly undone in a laudable attempt at reconciliation, Peale termed the secularization of Church property a “sacrilegious confiscation.” ⁸¹ Indeed, for most liberal Americans this constituted not only an abhorrent attack on faith, but what was perhaps even worse, an abominable assault on property rights. Freedom of the former had been written into the U.S. Bill of Rights, as had a guarantee of the latter. Napoleon, while re-establishing order, respect for property, and deference to ones “betters,” had done so at a heavy price. Liberty and prosperity had been sacrificed, and the country’s manhood was being drained by what appeared to be an interminable conscription. As regarded relations with the United States, Peale was convinced that Napoleon did not like the Americans, especially their “republican prosperity” and their “liberty of the press,” and Napoleon found something “inveterately English in our laws and customs” offensive. ⁸² He was right on the mark, and Americans in Napoleonic France were harassed in various ways, often even imprisoned on vague suspicions of espionage or sabotage, primarily because they were mistaken for

⁷⁹ Ibid., 97.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 188.

⁸¹ Ibid., 406.

⁸² Ibid., 195.

Englishmen (!), as I have demonstrated elsewhere.⁸³ Linked to the “perfidious Albion” by association, they, the Americans, were viewed as alien, and a potential threat. In a broader historical context, finally, the Napoleonic phenomenon raised the question in how far mankind as a whole had benefitted from his ascendancy, Peale mused. The answer was a resounding “no,” for France herself had been “humbled,” Europe plunged into war, and a “death-stroke [...] given to Liberty in every corner of the continent.”⁸⁴ Small wonder then, at the closing words of Peale’s final letter, reflecting, as they did, on a comparison between the France of a revolution gone awry, albeit mitigated by a dictatorship of public order and guarantee of property – but a dictatorship nonetheless – and the free American republic: “Let a passenger arrive from whence he may, [...] the reflection of a very few moments upon what he has seen in other countries, will convince him, when he comes to know America, that one of the greatest of all blessings is to be born in a free country.”⁸⁵

⁸³ William L. Chew III, “Yankees Caught in the Crossfire: The Trials and Travails of Americans in Revolutionary and Napoleonic France,” *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 32 (2003): 297-322.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 464.