

Rembrandt Peale's Lithograph Portrait of George Washington

By Franz Jantzen*

In 2009, the Supreme Court acquired a lithograph portrait of George Washington, made in 1827 by Rembrandt Peale (1778-1860). The print has a particularly important place in the history of American portrait printmaking, and is still in its original French Empire-style frame, which has recently been restored. The purchase was made possible with funds provided by the Supreme Court Historical Society.

While the Supreme Court generally collects objects directly related to Justices and the Court, several things make this particular print of President Washington a natural fit for the Court's collection, the most important being its close relationship to the Court's own portrait of Chief Justice John Marshall, also by Peale, which hangs in the East Conference Room. Both are from a very small series that have become known as Peale's "porthole" portraits. It is likely that Peale intended to portray a series of prominent Americans using this unique motif, but he ultimately painted only two in this way: President Washington and Chief Justice Marshall. (A third "porthole" portrait, of Baltimore businessman John Oliver, is at the Maryland Historical Society.) Of these, the painting of Washington is the only one to have been made into a lithograph, and to tell the story of the lithograph one must first begin with the story of the painting.

Rembrandt Peale was born into a family of artists, and at the age of 17 he had the good fortune to paint Washington's portrait from life alongside his father, the well-known painter Charles Willson Peale. This privilege made a lifelong impression on him, and nearly 30 years later, by then a successful artist in his own right, he decided to paint Washington again. With the Revolutionary War era fading into memory, Peale asserted that, as the last living painter to have painted Washington from life and who was still at the height of his artistic powers, he alone was a crucial bridge between past and present. This gave him the ambition and

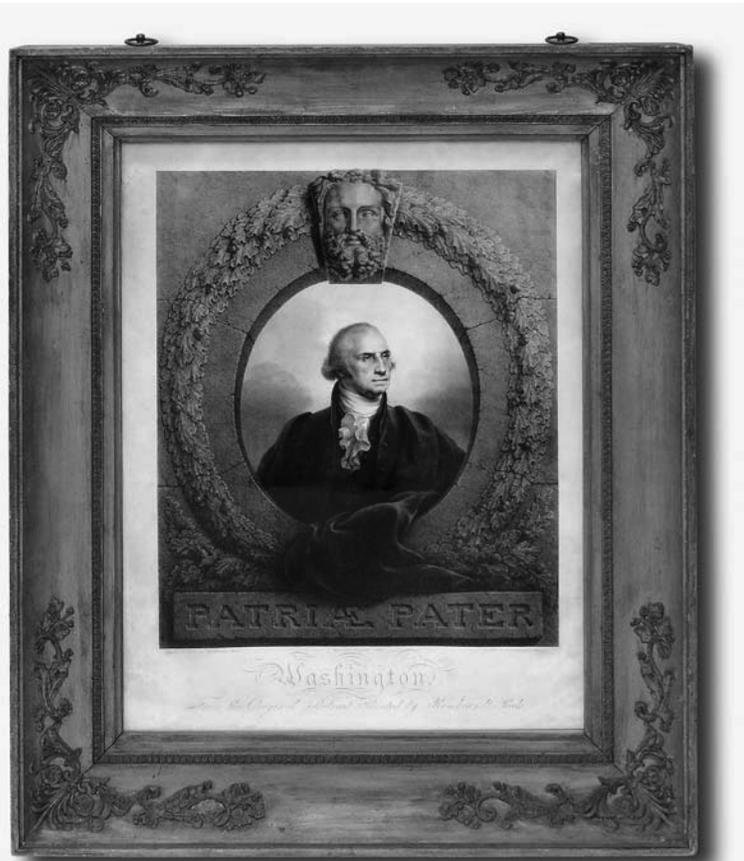
responsibility to aim for nothing less than "the standard National Likeness" of Washington which would transcend all others.

To this end he sequestered himself in his Philadelphia studio for three months, much to the consternation of his wife. The bold, new portrait of Washington that emerged in early 1824 had no precedent in American art, depicting its subject behind a trompe-l'œil porthole of stone with dramatic, ethereal clouds of smoke swirling behind him, the Roman god Jupiter in the keystone above and "PATRIÆ PATER" ("Father of His Country") carved in the tablet below.

To underscore the painting's accuracy and thus the legitimacy of his ambitions, Peale solicited testimonials from men who had known Washington, including Associate Justice Bushrod Washington and Chief Justice Marshall. Both were impressed. Marshall commented upon viewing it that, "It seems as if I were looking at the living man....It is more Washington himself than any Portrait of him I have ever seen." Peale fervently tried to sell the portrait to Congress for exhibition in the U.S. Capitol, but Congress was reluctant to commit the funds. (It would not be until eight years later, in 1832, that they would purchase it to commemorate the 100th anniversary of Washington's birth.)

In 1827, and still without a buyer for his Washington painting, Peale made the unusual decision to produce a lithographic version of it. He would then be able to print multiple copies, the sale and distribution of which would both provide income and help further his goal of establishing this image of Washington as a new standard likeness.

Peale was the first prominent American painter to learn the relatively new printmaking process of lithography, in which one draws with a crayon on stone to produce a drawing-like image which is capable of both crisp detail and subtle shading. Using this new process, Peale himself



GEORGE WASHINGTON by REMBRANDT PEALE, 1827 (LITHOGRAPHIC PRINT ON PAPER, 19 1/4" x 15 1/8"), COLLECTION OF THE SUPREME COURT

The Society recently purchased this lithographic portrait of George Washington by Rembrandt Peale and provided it to the Collection of the Supreme Court of the United States

redrew the portrait on stone, rather than passing it on to another printmaker. The resulting lithograph became a celebrated success far sooner than the painting, and won the prestigious Franklin Institute's highest honor that same year for "...the best specimen of American lithography ever seen by the committee on fine arts – a silver medal."

It is ironic that such a celebrated print which was to disseminate a new standard likeness of Washington is also relatively rare. In 1970 a Peale scholar was able to locate six extant prints, and with the internet as an additional tool, this author was barely able to double that. Thus, far more paintings of this "porthole" portrait of Washington exist than lithographs, since Peale is known to have painted an astounding 79 subsequent versions in oil after the first one in 1824. Peale's attempt to disseminate his likeness of Washington through sheer repetition is itself an entirely unique project in the history of American, and probably European, art.

"JOHN MARSHALL" BY REMBRANDT PEALE, C. 1834 (OIL ON CANVAS, 89 1/2" X 71 1/2"), COLLECTION OF THE SUPREME COURT



This portrait by Peale of John Marshall was a companion piece to the portrait of George Washington that appears in the lithograph recently obtained for the collection. They used to hang opposite one another in the US Capitol Building.

With his lithograph of Washington, Peale became the first prominent American artist to produce a print version after his own painting. Because of his reputation and the acclaim he received from this print in particular, other artists were quickly drawn to lithography. The idea of producing affordable versions in multiple after a single painting thus established a familiar pattern that continues today. With new developments in lithography and chromolithography, and the popularity of printmakers who adopted these new printing methods, such as John James Audubon and Currier & Ives, a new age of American printmaking had begun which would continue to flourish throughout the mid-19th century.

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WANTED

In the interest of preserving the valuable history of the highest court, The Supreme Court Historical Society would like to locate persons who might be able to assist the Society's Acquisitions Committee. The Society is endeavoring to acquire artifacts, memorabilia, literature and any other materials related to the history of the Court and its members. These items are often used in exhibits by the Court Curator's Office. If any of our members, or others, have anything they would care to share with us, please contact the Acquisitions Committee at the Society's headquarters, 224 East Capitol Street, N.E. Washington, D.C. 20003 or call (202)543-0400. Donations to the Acquisitions fund would be welcome. You may reach the Society through its website at www.supremecourthistory.org