

# NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

NEWS RELEASE

FOURTH STREET AT CONSTITUTION AVENUE NW WASHINGTON DC 20565 • 737-4215/842-6353

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART  
ACQUIRES MASTERPIECE BY  
CHARLES WILLSON PEALE

WASHINGTON, D. C. February 14, 1984. John Beale Bordley (1770), one of the most important portraits by Charles Willson Peale, the renowned eighteenth-century American painter, has been given to the National Gallery of Art by the Barra Foundation, Inc. of Philadelphia.

The National Gallery of Art's Board of Trustees voted at its mid-winter meeting on January 25, 1984, to accept the gift from the Barra Foundation, which fosters the advancement and diffusion of knowledge in the field of eighteenth-century American art. Robert L. McNeil, Jr., President and Treasurer of the foundation, is a collector of eighteenth-century paintings and decorative arts relating to Philadelphia.

The portrait has been on loan to the Gallery from the Barra Foundation since September 25, 1974 and is currently on view in the West Building, gallery 62.

The painting of Bordley is a fine example of neoclassic portraiture. One of Peale's sons, Rembrandt, said of his father "as a great painter, his likenesses were strong, but never flattered; his execution spirited and natural." The precise draftsmanship, realistic handling of light especially on the face and hands, and the use of delicate colors in the background of the Bordley portrait show Peale's style at its best.

Charles Willson Peale was born in 1741 on the Eastern Shore of Maryland in Queen Anne County. He worked as an apprentice to a saddle maker and did not see his first painting until he was twenty-one years old. As a self-taught, amateur painter, he depicted people in their homes on the Chesapeake Bay.

John Beale Bordley, a judge and a member of the Governor's Council, was also a close friend who helped to move the Peale family to Annapolis after the death of

(more)

Peale's father. Bordley recognized the young man's potential and raised money to send him to London to study under Benjamin West, father of the American School of painting. Initially, Peale wished to depict historical events, but history paintings proved to be unrewarding financially. He chose instead to combine portraiture with an historical statement as seen in the Bordley portrait.

During Peale's stay in London from 1767 to 1769, Parliament passed a bill to impose its will upon the assembly of the province of New York. Peale decided to do all in his power to further the cause of his country's independence. This portrait, the first one he completed upon his return to Annapolis from London, is filled with revolutionary symbolism intended as a warning to Britain. Bordley stands next to an open book whose Latin inscription reads, "we observe the laws of England to be changed."

Commissioned by Bordley's half brother, Edmund Jenings, the portrait was meant to be seen in London as an American counterpart to Peale's earlier allegory of freedom, the portrait of William Pitt. The portrait was presumably shipped to London in 1771. It disappeared and was not rediscovered until the twentieth century.

Bordley and Jenings both continued to be important to the development of Peale's career by helping Peale to acquire commissions in the wealthy colonies of Maryland and Virginia and in Philadelphia as well.

Charles Willson Peale was married three times and had seventeen children. Peale named several of them after great masters---Raphaelle, Rembrandt and Rubens for example---who also became accomplished and well-known painters in their day. Peale is one of the few artists to have painted George Washington from life (he did so seven times). He had a profound interest in natural science and is recognized as the founder of the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts.

END