

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

NEWS RELEASE

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

RUBENS PEALE WITH A GERANIUM, 1801
Rembrandt Peale (1778-1801)

(From the collection of Mrs. Norman B. Woolworth; Sold at Sotheby's, New York, December 5, 1985 to the National Gallery of Art for \$4.07 million.)

The purchase is the first made by the Gallery with the income from its new Patrons' Permanent Fund. That fund, the fruit of a nationwide fund-raising campaign ending this month, now exceeds \$55 million. Although its principal will not be touched, its income has been set aside for major acquisitions.

Without question, this is one of the most important, and most movingly beautiful, American paintings. The artist Rembrandt Peale was, with his older brother Raphaele, the most accomplished member of the second generation of the Peale family. Although justly famous for his many images of George Washington (two of which, including a "porthole" version, are in the Gallery's collection), and for his role as a leading public spokesman for the arts in early 19th century America, it was in this quiet, informal portrait intended for his family's enjoyment that Peale created his undisputed masterpiece.

Rubens Peale with a Geranium was painted in 1801, on the eve of Rembrandt and Rubens' departure for Europe. It had been a year of great importance for the Peale family, for it was then that Charles Willson Peale, assisted by his sons, had organized America's first great scientific expedition. The expedition culminated in the excavation of two nearly complete mastadon skeletons, which were among the scientific wonders of the era. In the autumn, Rembrandt and Rubens were sent to London with the second of these two skeletons, the first having been mounted and put on display in Philadelphia. Rembrandt, then aged 23, was to study at the Royal Academy, and Rubens, whose own artistic career was limited by poor eyesight (a condition attested to by the presence of two pairs of eyeglasses in the painting), was

(MORE)

to oversee the exhibition of the mastadon and to continue his scientific studies.

Rembrandt's portrait of Rubens, then, may be seen as a celebration of this important moment in the brothers' lives. On the one hand, it is a confident statement on Rembrandt's part of his artistic skills and sensibility. Drawing on everything his father had taught him, Peale created what is arguably the supreme example of American neo-classical portraiture and one of the most perfect expressions of the clear, rational vision of the Enlightenment. Unlike the virtuoso performances of Stuart and Sully, Peale's approach is informed by a delicate and refined handling of line, a careful attention to detail, and restrained, modulated color. The only comparable achievements in American painting are found in the very finest still lifes by Raphaelle Peale and more distantly, in the early works of John Vanderlyn.

Peale's portrait, however, does far more than simply attest to his own artistic skills, for it also celebrates the scientific accomplishments of its subject. Even at this early age (he was 17 at the time), Rubens had developed considerable skill as a botanist, and it was he according to tradition, who cultivated the first geranium in America. The painting is a visual testament to that achievement and to Rubens' promise as a scientist. The unorthodox composition, with figure and plant sharing equally the pictorial space, sensitively expresses Rubens' deep involvement in his chosen subject; the two are inextricably linked through close proximity, through actual touch, and, most importantly, through the implied sense of contemplation, as Rubens seems to reflect upon the results of his work. At the same time, and perhaps even more movingly, the painting expresses the obvious love and respect that Rembrandt felt for his brother.

In sum, Rubens Peale with a Geranium stands as a compelling record of both artistic and scientific achievement painted at a time when these were considered among mankind's highest accomplishments. It is fully worthy of its contemporary reputation as an American masterpiece of singular interest, rarity, and beauty. As such, it is a work of the highest importance to the National Gallery.

END