



1795

Oil on canvas  
89 1/2 x 39 3/8 inches  
(227.3 x 100 cm)

**CHARLES WILLSON PEALE**  
American

The George W. Elkins Collection,  
1945, E1945-1-1

### LET'S LOOK

Where are these young men standing? How can you tell?

What do you think they are doing? Where could they be going? What might happen next?

Where are the brightest parts of the painting? Where are the shadows?

### LET'S LOOK AGAIN

What did you notice first? Then where did you look? What do you think drew your eye there?

Imagine you could walk into the painting and follow the brothers upstairs. What do you think you might discover beyond the frame?

Why do you think Peale painted his son Raphaëlle walking up the steps, instead of down? What could the stairs symbolize?

## STAIRCASE GROUP (PORTRAIT OF RAPHAËLLE PEALE AND TITIAN RAMSAY PEALE I)

Two young men peer out at us from a curving staircase. They seem to invite us to walk right into this life-size painting and follow them upstairs. In fact, many viewers have been fooled into thinking that these are real people standing in a real staircase. As a part of the trick, the painting is surrounded by a wooden doorframe instead of a picture frame, and an actual step projects out from the bottom of the canvas. Even George Washington is believed to have tipped his hat to greet the young men when he first saw this work of art. Its fame has grown ever since.

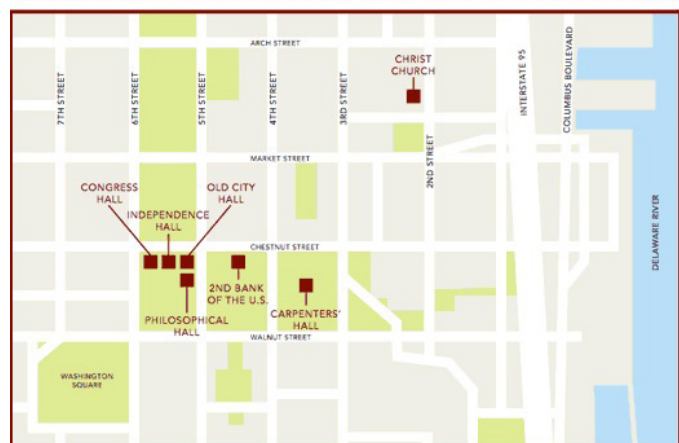
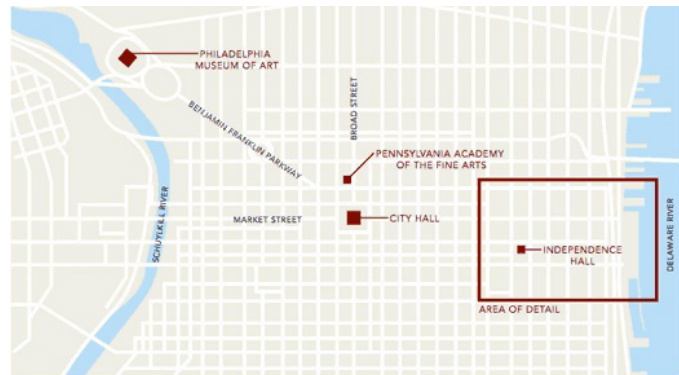
Charles Willson Peale, who painted *Staircase Group* in 1795, lived in Philadelphia and amazed people with his art. This image shows two of his sons, Raphaëlle (1774–1825) and Titian Ramsay (1780–1798). Raphaëlle was an artist and therefore holds the tools of his trade: paintbrushes, a palette for mixing oil paints, and a maulstick, which artists use as a support for their wrist while painting fine details. Titian, with an inquisitive look on his face, points a finger upward, suggesting there is more to see beyond the painted canvas. The boys wear typical eighteenth-century clothing—breeches, stockings, coats, and waistcoats (“WEST-kits”).

A small, white piece of paper appears to have been dropped on one of the steps. A closer look reveals that this is an entrance ticket to Peale’s Museum, which was then located in Philosophical Hall, next to the Pennsylvania State House (now called Independence Hall; see map). Peale wanted to educate the public through the displays of fine art and real specimens from nature. The museum featured fossils, preserved animals, birds, and insects, inventions, and a mastodon skeleton, as well as Peale’s portraits of famous people. He called his museum “a world in miniature” because it seemed to have one of everything. Admission to the museum cost twenty-five cents,



*Admission Ticket to Peale's Museum*  
1788  
Copperplate engraving (mezzotint)  
2 1/2 x 3 1/2 inches (6.4 x 8.9 cm)  
**CHARLES WILLSON PEALE**  
American

Gift of Jack L. Lindsey in honor of  
H. Richard Dietrich, Jr., and Robert  
L. McNeil, Jr., 1997, 1997-172-2



making it affordable for the average citizen.  
Thousands of people visited each year.

Peale painted the ambitious *Staircase Group* specifically for a special exhibition

in 1795 at the State House. The show celebrated the establishment of the Columbianum, the first art school in the country. Peale and other leaders organized the school so that aspiring American artists could receive training in Philadelphia instead of having to travel to study at the art academies in Europe. The exhibition also brought attention to American artistic accomplishments. Among the 150 works on view were thirteen paintings by Raphaele Peale and *Portrait of Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Mifflin (Sarah Morris)* by John Singleton Copley. For his contribution, Peale created a unique work of art that also conveyed a message. By portraying Raphaele confidently walking up the steps, Peale implied that art in the United States was progressing and its future was bright.

When Peale painted *Staircase Group*, his museum was located in Philosophical Hall, where he and his family also lived. The painting was first displayed at a special exhibition held at the Pennsylvania State House, now called Independence Hall. You can still visit these and other colonial-era buildings today.

Where is Titian pointing? It's possible that he's showing us the way to Peale's Museum. Some people believe that Peale cleverly positioned *Staircase Group* in the exhibition gallery so that visitors would follow the direction of Titian's finger to a nearby window, look outside, and see Peale's Museum in an adjacent building.

Peale later exhibited *Staircase Group* at his museum, where visitors marveled at its realism and appreciated its messages of national pride and hope for the future. It continues to embody these ideals and is today one of the most popular paintings at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

## ABOUT THIS ARTIST

In addition to being a painter, Charles Willson Peale (1741–1827) was a politician, entrepreneur, soldier, scientist, inventor, and farmer, and is often called a true Renaissance man. As a boy, he served as an apprentice to a saddle-maker in his native Maryland. He soon discovered that he possessed a natural talent for painting and traveled to London in 1767 to study with Benjamin West (1738–1820), a successful American-born artist. Peale returned to America two years later and earned a living painting portraits and signs in Maryland, Virginia, and Philadelphia, where he settled in 1776. Peale was widowed twice and married three times. He had eleven children who survived childhood and named many of them after famous artists, including the Italian Renaissance painters Raphael (1483–1520) and Titian (c. 1485–1576).

Peale was an active and prominent citizen in Philadelphia. He fought in the American Revolution (1775–83) and participated in the pivotal Battles of Trenton and Princeton (1776–77). During that time, he painted portraits of military leaders, including George Washington. After the war, Peale was elected to the Pennsylvania legislature. An important scientist and artist, he shared ideas with leading intellectuals including Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and the astronomer David Rittenhouse. One of Peale's most amazing accomplishments was his role in excavating a prehistoric mastodon skeleton in 1801 in New York State. He exhibited the skeleton at his natural history museum in Philadelphia.

While he pursued many interests other than art, Peale painted over 1,000 pictures during his lifetime. He believed passionately in the advancement of art in America. The Columbianum closed soon after its opening, but Peale helped to establish another art school in 1805, the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. This well-known institution, located on Broad Street in the heart of Philadelphia, is still in operation today.

## A LONG TRADITION OF PAINTING AS TRICKERY

Peale painted *Staircase Group* so that the figures and setting appear to be real. How did he do it? Part of his strategy was to paint every detail with precision and hide his brushstrokes. Look at

the steps at the bottom of the picture. Can you tell which part is wood and which part is painted imitation? The painted portion begins on the triangle-shaped step with the ticket; everything below that step is actual wood. Peale also used tricks of light and shadow to make the stairwell and figures look three-dimensional. For example, the top steps appear darker than the bottom steps, creating the sense that they are farther away. Light shines on the brothers' faces as well as on Titian's knee, which seems to project out of the painting. This highly realistic type of painting is known as *trompe l'oeil* ("tromp-LOY"), which means "fool the eye" in French.

Artists have enjoyed fooling people with *trompe l'oeil* paintings for centuries, perhaps as early as ancient times. A famous story tells of a competition between two ancient Greek artists, Zeuxis and Parrhasius. Zeuxis's painting of grapes looked so real that a group of birds flew down and began to peck at the delicious looking fruit. Certain that Parrhasius's painting would not look as real as his, Zeuxis asked Parrhasius to draw back the curtain covering his picture. Only then did Zeuxis discover that it was not a curtain at all but a painting of a curtain! Having tricked Zeuxis, Parrhasius was declared the winner of the contest.

By fooling those who saw *Staircase Group*, Peale proved that his artistic skill rivaled that of these legendary ancient painters as well as seventeenth-century Dutch artists who mastered the *trompe l'oeil* style. At a time in American history when the young nation was striving to prove itself to the world, Peale's painting served as a testament to American wit, talent, and youthful promise.

## CONNECT AND COMPARE

Research the painter's tools that Raphaele carries: brushes, a palette, and a maulstick. How are they used? What other tools did artists use in the eighteenth century? What tools do artists use today?

Explore American clothing from the late 1700s. What was the typical dress for men, women, and children? How did styles change over time? Compare Raphaele and Titian's clothing with styles of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Investigate the history of Peale's Museum. How did it start, and what was displayed? Who visited it? What were some of the reasons Peale wanted to open a museum?

## RELATED ART PROJECT

Create life-size portraits using kraft paper, either by putting the paper on the floor and tracing body outlines or by drawing from life. Remember to strike an interesting pose, like Raphaelle and Titian! What will your pose say about you? Add details such as clothing, hairstyle, and objects to convey information about you.

*This object is included in Pennsylvania Art: From Colony to Nation, a set of teaching posters and resource book produced by the Division of Education and generously supported by the Sherman Fairchild Foundation, Inc.*