



1819

Oil on canvas

24 x 20 inches (61 x 50.8 cm)

CHARLES WILLSON PEALE
American

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LET'S LOOK

What do you notice about the man in this portrait? Describe his clothing, hat, pose, and expression.

Look closely at the man's face. How might he be feeling, and what might he be thinking about?

How old do you think this person might be? What clues tell you that?

LET'S LOOK AGAIN

Read about the man in this portrait, Yarrow Mamout. What surprises you about his life story?

What new thoughts do you have about the portrait after reading about his life?

PORTRAIT OF YARROW MAMOUT (MUHAMMAD YARO)

In this masterfully painted portrait, a man looks directly at us and smiles. He wears a blue coat with shiny brass buttons, a heavy overcoat, and a knit cap, suggesting he may have just come inside from the cold. A bright red scarf peeks out from underneath his jacket and draws our attention to his face. The wrinkles on his forehead and around his eyes, as well as the white hair that emerges from underneath his cap, show that he has lived a long life. His rosy cheeks, warm brown skin tone, and the glint in his eyes tell us that he is lively and vibrant.

At first glance, it might seem that the person in this painting is an average, ordinary man, but he was quite extraordinary. Yarrow Mamout (c. 1736–1823) was brought in bondage from Guinea in West Africa to Maryland (see map) probably around 1752, when he was a teenager. By the time this portrait was made, he had endured forty-five years of slavery, gained his freedom, owned a house in Georgetown (now a neighborhood of Washington, D.C.), and held stock in a bank. Yarrow Mamout (or, more properly for West Africa, Mahmoud or Muhammad Yaro) could read and write Arabic, spoke English, and proudly practiced his Islamic faith.

In the winter of 1818–19, the American artist Charles Willson Peale (1741–1827) traveled to Washington, the nation's capital, to create portraits of prominent figures, including then-president James Monroe and future president Andrew Jackson, for exhibition in his museum in Philadelphia. While visiting a friend in Georgetown, he heard about Yarrow Mamout, who was said to be 140 years old (though he was actually around eighty-three). Peale was seventy-seven years old at the time and had a growing interest in how a person could achieve a long, healthy life. He set out to find Yarrow and paint his picture.

Peale completed Yarrow's portrait in two days and recorded the experience in his diary. He wrote, "It appears to me that the good temper of the [m]an has contributed considerably to longevity. Yarrow has been noted for sobriety & a chearfull conduct . . . [he] is often seen & heard in the Streets singing Praises to God—and conversing with him he said man is no good unless his religion comes from the heart." Peale admired how Yarrow had kept a positive outlook despite the struggles in his life. In the image, the artist carefully depicted Yarrow's physical characteristics and revealed his inner spirit as well.

Wanting to learn more about Yarrow's life, Peale visited Margaret Beall (pronounced "Bell"), whose family had enslaved Yarrow for forty-five years and then finally manumitted (legally freed) him. She told Peale that her late husband, Brooke, had stipulated that if Yarrow made enough bricks to build a house, he would be freed. Yarrow completed the arduous task but Brooke died before the house was completed. Fulfilling her husband's promise, Margaret manumitted Yarrow around 1797, and he became part of a free black community of about four hundred people in Georgetown. Margaret also told Peale of Yarrow's financial difficulties: he had twice lost his life savings when he entrusted it to merchants who went bankrupt. Rising above these setbacks, he purchased shares in the Columbia Bank of Georgetown to secure his savings. Peale visited the bank and confirmed that Yarrow was one of its first investors.

Yarrow Mamout was well-known and highly regarded in his own day. He was said to be the greatest swimmer of the Potomac River in his youth and was noted for his work ethic, laboring for fixed wages during the day and at night making nets, baskets, and other items for sale. When he died in 1823, his obituary read, "it is known to all that knew him, that he was industrious, honest, and moral." Almost two centuries later, Yarrow's legacy endures, and he remains a role model of perseverance and unwavering strength.

ABOUT THIS ARTIST

By the time he painted the portrait of Yarrow Mamout, Charles Willson Peale (1741–1827) had achieved recognition as an artist, politician, entrepreneur, soldier, scientist, inventor, and farmer. As a young man, he traveled to London to study with Benjamin West (1738–1820), a successful American-born artist living there. Peale returned to America two years later and earned a living painting portraits in Maryland, Virginia, and Philadelphia, where he settled in 1776.

Peale was a prominent citizen in Philadelphia. He fought in the American Revolution (1775–83) and painted portraits of military leaders, including George Washington. After the war, Peale was elected to the Pennsylvania legislature. He shared ideas with leading intellectuals including Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and the astronomer David Rittenhouse. One of Peale’s most impressive accomplishments was his role in excavating a prehistoric mastodon skeleton in 1801 in New York State, which he exhibited at his museum in Philadelphia. His museum featured fossils; preserved birds, other animals, and insects; inventions; and a portrait gallery. Yarrow Mamout’s portrait, along with Peale’s depictions of American presidents, politicians, scientists, artists, and other important people, was displayed there.

As a scientist and artist, Peale was interested in Yarrow Mamout’s longevity and the personal characteristics he believed contributed to it. In his writings and museum displays, Peale advocated that people make wise choices to maintain good health and a positive attitude. He painted several other sitters of advanced age, including himself, as seen here.

Like many other notable people at that time, Peale had been a slaveholder and later became an ardent abolitionist (someone who opposes slavery). Peale’s sensitive portrait of Yarrow reflects his regard for the man, showing him as an individual who engages directly with the viewer. The efforts Peale took to confirm Yarrow’s biography and to transcribe it carefully in his diary suggest he intended to convey the information to the thousands of visitors to his museum.

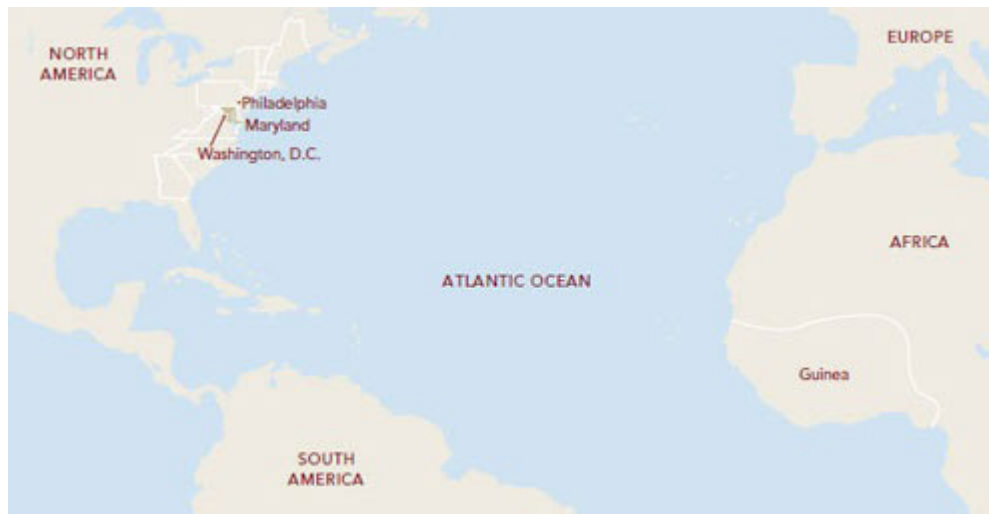
YARROW MAMOUT’S LEGACY

Yarrow Mamout was an exceptional man. In a time when painted portraits were rare, those of African-born sitters were even more scarce. Of the nearly one thousand portraits Peale painted, Yarrow was one of only two sitters of African descent. This image remains one of Charles Willson Peale’s most accomplished works of art and captivates viewers of all ages.

Yarrow’s religious beliefs as a Muslim (a follower of Islam) also distinguish him. It is unknown how many of the estimated 500,000 enslaved Africans who survived the brutal journey across the Atlantic Ocean (known as “the Middle Passage”) to North America were Muslim, because few written or visual records have survived. However, the majority came from West Africa, a region that had been under Islamic influence for centuries. It has been estimated that 10–20 percent were Muslim. Despite the predominance of Christianity in the United States, Yarrow remained steadfast in his devotion to Islam.

According to writings by his contemporaries, he was admired for adhering to his faith. In fact, his obituary noted that he was buried in the section of his garden where he was known to pray.

Yarrow's family name has also endured. His son, Aquilla, lived in Pleasant Valley, Maryland, with his wife, known as Polly, who was a midwife. A neighborhood in that town, still known as Yarrowsburg, was named for her. Through Peale's compelling portrait, Yarrow's life story, and his family's lasting legacy, Yarrow Mamout continues to inspire and impress us today.



This map shows several important places in the lives of Yarrow Mamout and Charles Willson Peale. Yarrow was born in Guinea in West Africa around 1736 and brought in bondage to Maryland. After forty-five years of slavery, he lived as a free man in Georgetown (now a neighborhood in Washington, D.C.), where Peale painted his portrait. Peale hung this portrait in his museum in Philadelphia.

CONNECT AND COMPARE

After reading about Yarrow Mamout, imagine that you could interview him. What would you ask, and what do you think he would say? What question might he want to ask you?

Research the free black population of the nation's capital and other American cities in the early nineteenth century, especially after the U.S. Congress prohibited the importation of slaves in 1808. What can you learn about their lives?

Research the spread of Islam through Africa. Who introduced it to the continent, and how did its influence extend to new areas?

RELATED ART PROJECT

Charles Willson Peale wanted his portrait of Yarrow Mamout to capture the sitter's physical characteristics as well as his determination and positive attitude. Think of someone you admire for their personal traits and make a portrait (from life or from a photograph) that conveys these characteristics. How will you have the person pose? Will your portrait be half-length, like this one, or full-length, showing the whole body? What kind of facial expression will they have? What will they wear?