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Rembrandt Peale's Hawaiian Ethnographic Still Life

THE IMPORTANCE OF Rembrandt Peale (1778–1860) to the artistic heritage of the United States has been demonstrated in recent years through exhibitions, books, and essays—especially since the purchase of his painting, *Rubens Peale with a Geranium*, by the National of Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., and the exhibition, “In Pursuit of Fame,” that opened at the Smithsonian Institution’s National Portrait Gallery on November 6, 1992. The purpose of this short essay is to bring to wider attention a painting that I attributed to Rembrandt Peale during my lecture for the Smithsonian Institution National Associate Program at Bishop Museum on February 16, 1990. The painting, which I characterize as an “ethnographic still life,” is a portrait of a young man wearing a Hawaiian feathered cloak and helmet (fig. 1) and is part of the visual collections of the Bishop Museum, Honolulu. Although the painting is unsigned and undated, my research—based on painting style and subject matter—indicates that it is by Rembrandt Peale¹ and probably dates to the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century.

This *ethnographic* still life focuses on Hawaiian chiefly regalia and might be considered a companion piece to Rembrandt Peale’s 1801 *botanical* still life, *Rubens Peale with a Geranium* (fig. 2), which Wilmerding has characterized as “one great masterwork

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FIG. 1. Rembrandt Peale, *Man in Hawaiian Regalia*, ca. 1800, 76.2 × 63.2 cm. Bishop Museum, Honolulu. Bequest of Helene Irwin Fagan, 1966-67. (BPBM.)

. . . a singular work [that] would be an unsurpassed achievement for Rembrandt and has remained one of the most original images in the history of American art."²² The two paintings are similar in size (Honolulu 76.2 × 63.2 cm; Washington 71 × 61 cm), both are portraits with the sitter's right hand grasping part of a still life,



FIG. 2. Rembrandt Peale, *Rubens Peale with a Geranium*, 1801, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 71 × 61 cm. (National Gallery of Art.)

and together they illustrate both the ethnographic and natural history emphases of the wide-ranging collections of Rembrandt's father, Charles Willson Peale (1741-1827), in whose museum they were probably both painted. The paintings also illustrate Rembrandt's artistic vision of the parallel importance of portraiture and science—found in many of the artistic works and museums of the Peale family. Finally, both works feature scientific “firsts”—

individualized human subjects are illustrated with individualized non-human subjects that were the first of their kind to be imported into America. As Wilmerding has noted, the geranium was the first (or one of the first) specimens of this species brought to America.³ Similarly, the Hawaiian feathered cloak and helmet were among the first of their kind to be imported to America. Just as the geranium is an “exemplum of botanical science,”⁴ the featherwork stands as an exemplum of ethnographic science. As a pair, the paintings are even more “original” than Wilmerding imagined.

The “American Museum” of Charles Willson Peale was begun in 1784 and eventually included a wide variety of ethnographic specimens, including a number of objects of American Indian origin as well as objects from South America, the Pacific Islands, Africa, and China. Three Hawaiian feathered cloaks and helmets are documented as part of Charles Willson Peale’s collection. The earliest was accessioned about 1790—a “War Cap and Cloak” of feathers. Another set came in 1791, and in March 1792 President George Washington gave Peale a third set,

An Otahitian⁵ dress, consisting of a long cloak and a cap, made of feathers, and very elegant. Being a present to the President of the United States, by some gentlemen of Boston, adventurers in the first voyage made from thence to Nootka Sound, and the Otahitian Islands, now deposited in this Museum for preservation and safe-keeping for the President.⁶

All three sets of Hawaiian featherwork in the Peale Museum were probably collected on the voyage of the *Columbia* under Captain Gray that visited Hawai‘i in 1789 and was the first American vessel to circumnavigate the globe.⁷

The Hawaiian featherwork from the *Columbia* appears to be the earliest to have been imported into the United States,⁸ although a number of pieces were taken to Europe by the earlier voyage of Captain James Cook.⁹ The pieces deposited by President Washington would surely be appropriate examples to illustrate the ethnographic “first” just as the geranium was a botanical “first” illustrated in the painting with Rubens. Considered as a pair,

these two paintings reveal Rembrandt's remarkable early talent for raising still life to the more highly regarded genre of portrait painting, and as depictions or symbols of "events," they might even have been considered in the highest-ranking category of history paintings. If we could identify the sitter, an even stronger case might be made. At the same time, the pair of paintings elevate scientific illustration (an even lesser-ranked genre) to artistic still life.

Further, I want to speculate about a third painting, a self-portrait by Rembrandt holding in his right hand a mastodon tooth—a zoological exemplum. This now overpainted canvas has revealed its secret through X-ray (fig. 3). Miller suggests that this painting may have been meant as a companion piece to that of Rubens with a geranium for exhibition during the 1802-03 London showing of the mastodon excavated by the Peales in 1801.¹⁰ The painting of Rembrandt with the mastodon tooth is again of similar size (71.1 × 60.3 cm), and, in my view, may have completed a triptych illustrating three scientific "firsts" in Charles Willson Peale's museum representative of ethnography, botany, and zoology.

The composition of the featherwork painting, with the individual facing to the left, is based on diagonal symmetry which contrasts with the bilateral symmetry of the geranium painting, with Rubens facing forward, making them a balanced artistic pair. And if my speculation that the three paintings form a triptych can be continued, Rembrandt's self-portrait faces to the right, making them a balanced trio. An incongruous element in the Hawaiian painting is the rather odd positioning of the darker brown hand grasping the wooden implement, as if the sitter were wearing a glove. The face and helmet have the same specific animated individuality and three-dimensionality of the sitter and plant in the geranium painting. Rembrandt, who had been trained in the chemical composition of pigment, already displays his excellent sense of color in the difficult reds of the Hawaiian featherwork shown off to their advantage on a nearly flat, dark background. However, the painting does not yet show the delicacy of shading that he learned in England after 1802.¹¹ The depiction of the 1792 featherwork gifts of President Washington would have personal



FIG. 3. X-ray showing *Self-Portrait with Mastodon Tooth* by Rembrandt Peale, 1803, under portrait of Sarah Franklin Bache, 71.1 × 60.3 cm. Private collection. (National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution.)

meaning to Rembrandt as he and Washington shared the same birthday, and Rembrandt painted his first portrait of Washington in 1795. It is a pity that Rembrandt did not depict the featherwork on Washington himself. I suggest that the painting was executed between 1792 (when the objects were presented to Charles Willson

Peale) and 1802 (before Rembrandt went to England). An entry in an exhibition guide that seems to refer to the painting, "Portrait of a man dressed in the manner of a Otaheitan Chief Warrior," is dated to 1795.¹²

The cloak and especially the helmet illustrated by Rembrandt are almost certainly two of the pieces depicted by Titian Ramsay Peale (1799–1885) in a cultural vignette in his *Day View of Kilauea Volcano* (fig. 4 and 5). Although Titian saw the volcano in action in 1840 while he served as naturalist on the U.S. Exploring Expedition of 1838–42 and illustrated his scenes from life, feathered clothing was not collected, and not even seen, during the expedition's visits to Hawai'i. Like Rembrandt, Titian must have simply painted the feathered regalia from objects in his father's museum—and, perhaps, from Rembrandt's painting. Titian's Hawaiian chief (fig. 4) wears the same feathered helmet, depicted from the same view, as Rembrandt's earlier picture. Indeed, Titian's whole volcano picture (fig. 5) is reminiscent of Rembrandt's painting, *Niagara Falls, A General View*, 1831, complete with a cultural vignette (fig. 6). Except for the yellow spokes (which would have changed the composition of Rembrandt's painting), the helmet (fig. 7) is quite accurately illustrated by both Rembrandt and

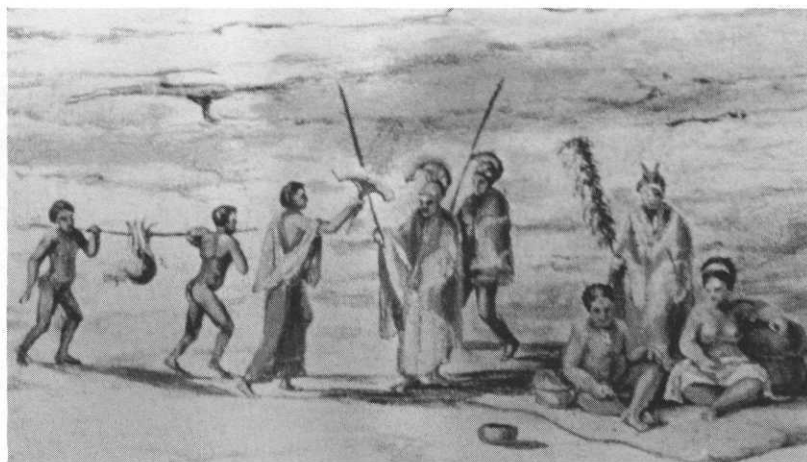


FIG. 4. Hawaiian ceremony at Kilauea volcano. Detail of fig. 5. (BPBM.)



FIG. 5. Titian Ramsay Peale, *Day View of Kilauea Volcano*, 1842, 51.5 × 76.5 cm. Bishop Museum, Honolulu. Gift of Albert Rosenthal, 1924. (BPBM.)

Titian. This type of helmet is very rare and there is little doubt that the one depicted is the one now in the Peabody Museum, Harvard.¹³

The incorporation of a non-Western art object into a Western painting genre illustrates how recontextualization can change the meaning and value of such an object. Originally worn by the highest-ranking Hawaiian chiefs in sacred and dangerous situations, featherwork protected the sacred top of the head and backbone. This sacred clothing was a visual manifestation of social relationships among the gods, the stratified Hawaiian society, and the universe. The helmet was not only a work of art, but a symbol of power. As a gift to President Washington, the helmet demonstrated the esteem of the Hawaiians for the highest ranking American and presumably signaled an intent to enter into a political relationship with him. The helmet's recontextualization into a Western artwork, however, especially on an American who was not Washington, was surely an inappropriate representation. Ironically, if the helmet and the painting were sold on the open market today, the picture of the helmet would surely be assigned a greater monetary value than the helmet itself, revealing our twen-



FIG. 6. Rembrandt Peale, *Niagara Falls, A General View*, 1831, 47 × 61 cm. Lowe Art Museum, University of Miami, Coral Gables, Florida. Gift of Allan Gerdaud. (Roland I. Unruh.)

tieth-century value system that a painting by an important artist is somehow more important than the non-Western art object it depicts.

Rembrandt's Hawaiian ethnographic still life is part of the collection of the Bishop Museum, acquired in 1966-67 from the Fagan Estate. At that time I was an anthropologist at the Bishop Museum and this painting always intrigued me—although it was never highly regarded in Hawai'i because it obviously did not depict a Hawaiian. Although I recognized the similarity of the featherwork to the vignette in Titian Ramsay Peale's painting (also in Bishop Museum) and had done a great deal of work on museum collections of these objects—noting that the closest helmet was in the Peabody Museum—I did not have the opportunity to pursue my research on the painting until I was working on the exhibition at the Smithsonian's Natural History Museum, "Magnificent Voyagers: The U.S. Exploring Expedition of 1838-1842." I had suspected that the painting was done by one of the Peales

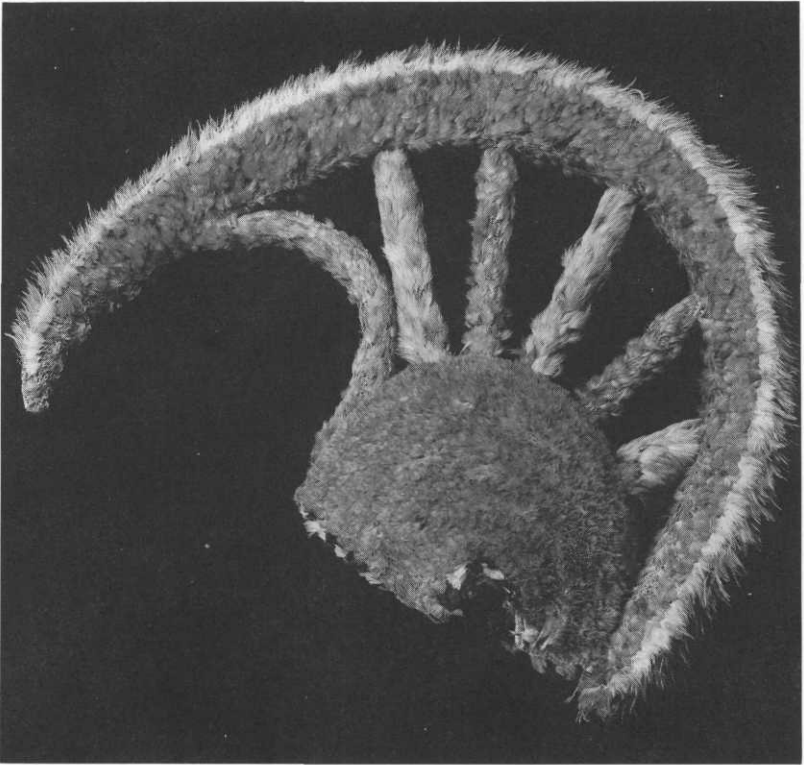


FIG. 7. Hawaiian feathered helmet acquired on the 1789 visit of the *Columbia*. Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University. (Peabody Museum, Harvard University.)

but did not identify it as a Rembrandt Peale until I studied the exhibition on Rembrandt at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania in 1985.

The history of the painting before 1966, however, is still elusive. Paul I. Fagan (1890-1960), an industrialist and philanthropist, appears to have moved to Hawai'i about 1930. He bought Kaeleku sugar plantation in 1944 to form Hana Ranch and the site of Hotel Hana-Maui. His wife, Helene Fagan (1889-1966), was the daughter of a Hawai'i sugar and banking magnate and grew up in Hawai'i. The Fagans had a large house on Diamond Head Road in Waikikī. A frequent visitor to the house believes the

painting hung in the library, rather than the more frequented living room—which was embellished with paintings by Eskridge—and therefore was relatively unknown even to Hawai'i residents. Both Paul and Helene Fagan died in Hillsborough, California. Helene Fagan's cousin, Alice Spalding Bowen, the manager of the Honolulu branch of S. G. Gump and Co. of San Francisco, lived close to the Fagans' Diamond Head house. It is possible that she found the painting in San Francisco. Paul's son-in-law from a previous marriage was an interior decorator in San Francisco, so it appears that a California connection is possible. As a definitive history of the pre-1966 travels of this painting is still to be discovered and the sitter has yet to be identified,¹⁴ I hope that this short note will generate some missing pieces as well as give this little-known painting the attention it so richly deserves.

NOTES

- ¹ This has been confirmed on stylistic grounds by Lillian Miller and Carol Hevner (personal communication) and was included in the Smithsonian Institution's 1992–93 exhibition on Rembrandt Peale. See Lillian B. Miller, *In Pursuit of Fame, Rembrandt Peale 1778–1860, With an Essay on the Paintings of Rembrandt Peale: Character and Conventions* by Carol Eaton Hevner (Washington: National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, in association with the U of Washington P, Seattle and London, 1992) 257–58.
- ² John Wilmerding, "America's Young Masters Raphaelle, Rembrandt, and Rubens," *Raphaelle Peale Still Lifes* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1988) 72–91.
- ³ Wilmerding, "America's Young Masters" 74.
- ⁴ Wilmerding, "America's Young Masters" 75.
- ⁵ In the eighteenth century "Otaheite" was the designation for all the Polynesian islands, including Hawai'i.
- ⁶ Quoted in Charles Coleman Sellers, *Mr. Peale's Museum* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1980) 41–42.
- ⁷ Two other cloaks (one long and one medium length) connected with this voyage were given to Joseph Barrell, one of the owners of *Columbia*; were inherited by his daughter, Mrs. Benjamin Joy; were at one time in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; and are now in the Bishop Museum, Honolulu. See Adrienne L. Kaeppler, "Feather Cloaks, Ship Captains, and Lords," *Occasional Papers of the Bernice P. Bishop Museum*, 24.6 (1970): 91–114.
- ⁸ The next known import of a Hawaiian feathered helmet was donated by Major Ladson to the Charleston Museum in 1798.

- ⁹ See Adrienne L. Kaeppler, "Artificial Curiosities," *An Exposition of Native Manufactures Collected on the Three Pacific Voyages of Captain James Cook, R.N.* (Honolulu: Bishop Museum P, 1978).
- ¹⁰ Miller, *In Pursuit of Fame* 58.
- ¹¹ Carol Eaton Hevner, "The Portraiture of Rembrandt Peale: Artistic Aspirations and Stylistic Changes," *Rembrandt Peale 1778-1860: A Life in the Arts*, ed. Carol Eaton Hevner and Lillian B. Miller (Philadelphia: Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 1985) 22.
- ¹² Miller, *In Pursuit of Fame* 42. Hevner, however, dates it to "circa 1805-1813." See Carol Eaton Hevner, "The Paintings of Rembrandt Peale: Character and Conventions," *In Pursuit of Fame* 257-58.
- ¹³ The helmet was part of a large purchase made by Moses Kimball and P. T. Barnum from the Peale estate in 1849-50. The helmet apparently went to Kimball, who gave much of his collection to the Boston Museum in 1893, and it was transferred to the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology in 1899. See Sellers, *Mr. Peale's Museum* 312-23, and the accession records of the Peabody Museum. The only other helmet of this style known to me within the United States is the now featherless helmet in The Children's Museum of Indianapolis; its history is unknown.
- ¹⁴ Perhaps the sitter was another family member such as a cousin or even his brother, Raphaëlle (1774-1825). Raphaëlle was depicted by Charles Willson Peale in *The Staircase Group* in 1795 as a more elegant, handsome young man, but Rembrandt was known for his more true likenesses of individuals. In any case, there does seem to be at least a family resemblance.