Text Matters, Volume 5, Number 5, 2015
https://doi.org/10.1515/texmat-2015-0008

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Charles Willson Peale's *The Exhumation of the Mastodon* and the Great Chain of Being: The Interaction of Religion, Science, and Art in Early-Federal America

Abstract

Although primarily known as a portrait painter, Charles Willson Peale (1741–1827) also possessed a profound interest in natural history. Indeed, Peale eventually founded the first natural history museum in the United States, and, during the end of the eighteenth century, he began to overlap his two great interests: art and nature. The event Peale chronicled in his 1804 painting *The Exhumation of the Mastodon* caused an extreme stir within the intellectual and religious circles of its time, and brought about, at the very least, a serious questioning in the deeply held notion of the Great Chain of Being. Although now largely discredited, this religious conviction postulated two concepts that Peale's *Exhumation of the Mastodon* seemingly contradicts. The first was the belief that no animals since creation had suffered the fate of extinction. The second was a lack of belief in geological time. Indeed, one Irish clergyman calculated the actual date of creation to 4004 BCE.

In this paper, I explore Peale's monumental painting, a work that is many things, a self-portrait and history painting among others. Indeed, in this painting, Peale was responding to science, religion, and their shifting positions within early-nineteenth-century America. When viewed together, Peale's *The Exhumation of the Mastodon* is not merely a record of an event that occurred in New York during the early nineteenth century, and instead is a document of Peale and the interaction of science and religion in early-Federal America.

"But the world itself is only a speck of dust. And man is tiny—helpless! How long has he been in existence? For millions of years the earth was uninhabited."
"Nonsense. The earth is as old as we are, no older. How could it be older? Nothing exists except through human consciousness."
"But the rocks are full of the bones of extinct animals—mammoths and mastodons and enormous reptiles which lived long before man was ever heard of."
"Have you ever seen those bones, Winston? Of course not. Nineteenth-century biologists invented them. Before man there was nothing . . ."
George Orwell, *1984*

Although the name Charles Willson Peale (1741–1827) is not one immediately familiar to those outside the circles of American art history, it would be difficult to overstate his prominence during the end of the eighteenth century. Indeed, Peale is one of only four artists James Thomas Flexner explored in his seminal 1939 study, *America's Old Masters* (171–246), and Wayne Craven describes Peale as the most "American" of eighteenth-century painters in *Colonial American Portraiture* (383–400). An examination of Peale's *oeuvre* shows that he painted the social, political, and economic elite of his day: scientists, presidents, and prominent merchants among them.

Yet despite this artistic fame in his own time, Peale largely pushed his creative energies during the later part of his career towards the creation of the first natural history museum in the United States, and, some would claim, with significant justification, the world. Although the museum officially opened on 18 July, 1786, Peale began an advertisement blitz that lasted for five months in the *Philadelphia Packet* eleven days prior. The announcement, which also ran in periodicals up and down the eastern seaboard, is worth quoting directly:

> Mr. Peale, ever desirous to please and entertain the Public, will make a part of his House a Repository for Natural Curiosities—the Public he hopes will thereby be gratified in the sight of many of the Wonderful Works of Nature which are now closeted but seldom seen. The several articles will be classed and arranged according to their several species; and for greater ease to the Curious, on each piece will be inscribed the place from whence it came, and the name of the Donor, unless forbid, with such information as may be necessary.
>
> Mr. Peale will most thankfully receive the Communications of Friends who will favour him with their Assistance in this Undertaking. (Sellers 23)

And so, for the remainder of his life and with the able assistance of several of his sons, Charles Willson Peale continued to fill, classify, and organize his museum with animals, plants, and minerals, both large and small.

Although Peale's museum opened in 1786, what was to become the real centrepiece of the institution did not arrive for more than fifteen years. In June of 1801, Peale packed his trunks to visit an unusual biological find on John Masten's farm outside Newburgh, New York. There lay the bones of what Peale (and others) called the Great Incognitum. Peale, ever the cagey businessman, at first only asked to sketch the skeletal remains. Afterwards, he offered Masten $300 for full ownership: $200 for the "much injured" bones already recovered, and an additional $100 for the privilege of further excavation on Masten's estate. To sweeten the deal the following morning, Peale also offered Mr. Masten a double-barrelled shotgun for his eldest son[1] (Miller, *Selected Papers* 2.1: 330–31). Peale crated up the bones Masten had already unearthed—an immense femur among them—and began his return to Philadelphia. A buzz of anticipation preceded Peale, as he wrote in his diary on 29 June, 1801, from New York City: "The Vice President of the United States [Aaron Burr] and a considerable number of Ladies and Gentlemen came to see the Bones, the news of them must have flown like wild fire, for upwards [of] 80 persons came to see them that evening" (Miller, *Selected Papers* 2.1: 334).

Peale was home in Philadelphia no later than the second week of July 1801. On the 17th of that month, Peale exhibited the large-scale drawings he had completed on Masten's farm to seven members of the American Philosophical Society, much to their delight. One week hence, Peale wrote to Robert Patterson, one of the vice presidents of the American Philosophical Society, to inquire about a loan so as to complete the excavations on Masten's estates. That same day, 24 July, Patterson and the twenty-four members present at a special meeting of the APS unanimously voted to grant Peale a $500 advance. Less than a week later, Peale again packed his trunks, and, with his oldest son,

[1] Masten first asked Peale for his "double barril Fuzee." The artist explained that the gun in his possession was a gift to a deceased son, Titian Ramsey Peale, from a French nobleman as a token of friendship, and thus carried significant sentimental value. The pair reached a compromise, and Peale wrote to Masten from New York City on 1 July, 1801, to say that he was sending along a quality firearm made by "the most celebrated Gunsmith of London" to Masten's son, John. Peale also sent as gifts some calico for Masten's wife, and a silk handkerchief for his daughter (Miller, *Selected Papers* 2.1: 330-31).

Rembrandt, in tow, made the coach passage northwards to Masten's farm. There, over the next six weeks, Peale and his team diligently worked to unearth another Great Incognitum. They first built a mill-like device that was able to drain the twelve-foot-deep marl pit. This allowed Peale to disinter the remaining mastodon skeleton. According to Peale's diary, the ingenious engineering solution of draining the pit allowed the excavations to proceed rather smoothly. Only one small hiccup threatened. To quote Charles Coleman Sellers,

> With all in order and hopes high, the skies had darkened, lightning flashed, and thunder rolled with all the flamboyant fury of a Catskill Mountain storm. The downpour it threatened would have washed down banks and wheel together, wrecking and flooding all. (137)

The storm thankfully passed, and Peale's men conscientiously continued their work.

Charles Willson and Rembrandt were on their way back to Philadelphia no later than the fourth week of September, and the Peale family must have immediately undertaken the herculean task of assembling a complete mastodon skeleton to exhibit in their space within Philosophical Hall. If it was not complete by the first week of December, it must have been nearing so, for, on 4 December, Peale formally announced the acquisition of the mastodon remains and that he was preparing to display the quadruped's skeleton later that month. On 24 December, Peale placed a special invitation to the American Philosophical Society in the Philadelphia *Aurora*: "Charles Willson Peale's respectful compliments to the Members of the American Philosophical Society, and request the favour of their company, This Day, 24th inst. to view the SKELETON of the MAMMOTH, now erected in a room within their walls" (Miller, *Selected Papers* 2.1: 376–77). The mastodon exhibit opened to the general public on Christmas Day; admission to the museum was twenty-five cents, while viewing the "Skeleton of the Mammoth," as the broadside advertised, was an additional half-dollar. To further aid accessibility to the public, Peale installed lamps so that the mastodon could be viewed six nights a week until 10 o'clock.

Given the novelty of the exhibit, it is no surprise that Peale quickly recovered his expenses and was able to repay the American Philosophical Society, the organization that helped to finance this excavation expedition. Although Peale had completed comparatively few paintings during the previous decade, opting instead to put his energy into work for his museum, it is clear he thought the mastodon, and, more specifically its exhumation,

was worthy of returning to his palette and pencil. The first mention of this within Peale's voluminous correspondence occurs in a letter he wrote to Thomas Jefferson on 19 August, 1804: "I have in view the execution of one large historical picture, which perhaps may be my last work in that line" (Miller, *Selected Papers* 2.2*:* 747–48). Yet despite this mid-1804 date, Peale had only completed a small study two years hence, and was set, in September 1806, to finally begin the full-sized composition. Writing to his son Rubens, Peale explained:

> The figures in this piece will be large enough for me to introduce some portraits. . . . This piece will try my talents in a composition of figures, and if I succeed well may enduce [*sic*] me to pursue the art with more diligence than I have heretofore done, or if otherwise, will discourage me & be my last labour with the brush. All I can say at present, is that [I] feel confident, & have a hope of acquiring renown in my latter days as an historical painter. (Miller, *Selected Papers* 2.2: 982-83)

Peale worked on this large composition over the next two years, mentioning the painting in subsequent letters to Rubens, John Isaac Hawkins (an English-born inventor living in the United States), and Benjamin West (Peale's artistic mentor while studying in London). The final mention of this painting occurred in a letter Peale wrote on 10 September, 1808, to Rembrandt, the eldest Peale son, who had departed for Paris in April of that year to paint portraits for Peale's museum. Charles Willson's comments indicate that the picture was nearing completion (984, 996, 1010, 1036, 1052, 1136).

The painting, which measures just over 4' x 5', is usually called *The Exhumation of the Mastodon*. It remains one of the highlights of Charles Willson Peale's painting *oeuvre*, and is one of his more complicated compositions. The middle third of the painting is dominated by the pyramidal construction that Peale built to drain the marl pit. A sizable, mill-like wheel can be seen above ground and behind this construction. Peale hired young boys to walk on the inside of the wheel to provide the mechanical power that lowered the empty buckets into the morass and then raised the water-filled containers upwards to be emptied[2] (Miller, *Selected Papers* 2.1*:* 357, 359). Thirteen men can be counted at work beneath ground, including one, closest to the bucket contraption, who proudly displays a recently discovered mastodon bone, likely a fibula. John Masten, upon whose farm

[2] According to Peale's own calculations, this arrangement could empty approximately 1440 gallons per hour.

the excavations occurred, stands on a ladder in the lower-middle part of the composition.

If the figures below ground seem to be anonymous workers, many of those above ground comprise an anachronistic group portrait, for, as Charles Willson's own diary makes clear, the only member of the Peale family to accompany the patriarch on the excavation was Rembrandt. Nonetheless, the artist chose to include nearly his entire family in this composition, including some who were no longer alive. Charles Willson can be seen on the right side of the painting, with one hand holding a drawing of the mastodon skeleton, and majestically gesturing to the work being done on his behalf with the other. Other members of this group include Peale's second wife, Hannah, Rembrandt, Sybilla, Elizabeth, Rubens, and, finally, Raphaelle, who holds the rolled-up end of the mastodon drawing. Just to the right of the wheel is Peale's deceased wife, Elizabeth DePeyster Peale, who can be seen scolding a young Titian Ramsay II. Finally, the two youngest Peale sons, Franklin and Linnaeus, playfully push a floating log with a lengthy pole just to the right of the mill-like wheel (Richardson, Hindle, and Miller 85).

Peale first arrived at John Masten's estate in June 1801, but he did not complete exhuming the fossilized remains until sometime in early September. Peale could have chosen any number of moments to depict in his painting, or could have taken artistic liberty to create a scene that did not actually occur. Instead, Peale chose to paint the one high-drama event in the entire exhumation process: the moment when dark storm clouds threatened to flood the morass that Peale's workers had so diligently laboured to drain. Indeed, the upper third of the painting is composed of wind-swept trees—note how the branches seem to bend from the viewer's right to left—and the ominous rainclouds that promised to not only halt work, but perhaps to destroy Peale's pit-draining engineering. Yet despite this sublime view of nature, those who work on Peale's behalf are undeterred and remain focused on their work at hand.

Without doubt, *The Exhumation of the Mastodon* remains one of the most important American paintings of the early nineteenth century, and it is because of this importance that it has attracted such scholastic attention. In 1981, Lillian B. Miller, editor of the Charles Willson Peale Papers, wrote, "Until recently, the painting has been regarded as either 'an amusing record of the Museum' or an example of 'the amplification of American self-portraiture . . . [merging] with . . . genre painting'" (*History Painter* 47–48). Miller then convincingly examined Peale's work within the context of eighteenth-century historical paintings. Laura Rigal has written a persuasive article that places *The Exhumation of the Mastodon*

within the political climate of early-nineteenth-century America (18–38). More recently, David R. Brigham has explored this work as a biblical metaphor involving the Great Deluge (38–44).

While all of these interpretations add to a more full understanding of Peale's painting and what it meant to an early-nineteenth-century audience, one particular interpretation has been thus far overlooked: that of the interaction of religion and science in early-Federal America. This is not to suggest that previous examinations are any less valid. Instead, this exposition only adds to the panoply of meanings that surround *The Exhumation of the Mastodon*. Without doubt, given the complicated nature of both the composition and the subject matter, it is likely that this particular painting could have meant many things to many different audiences.

In order to fully explore *The Exhumation of the Mastodon* within the contexts of religion and science, it is important to first establish the prevailing feelings about the interactions between these two disparate fields of knowledge during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. An excellent point of departure would be the intellectual ruminations of James Ussher (1581–1656), Archbishop of Armagh from 1625 until his death exactly thirty-one years later. Ussher was the author of *The Annals of the Old Testament, Deduced from the First Origin of the World*, a treatise first published in two parts in Latin (1650 and 1654), followed by a posthumous English translation in 1658. In his *magnum opus*, Ussher utilized a literal translation of the Book of Genesis to calculate the exact moment of divine creation: the evening before 23 October, 4004 BCE. According to Ussher, Adam and Eve had a remarkably short stay in the Garden of Eden, being expelled their very first day (18). Calculating forward and using the same methodology, Ussher concluded that the waters rescinded from the Great Deluge on 23 October, 2348 BCE, a date that conveniently coincides with the 1,656th anniversary of Creation (21). Ussher's historical account progresses onwards until the birth of Jesus Christ in 4 BCE.

Although several prominent intellectuals attempted to refine Ussher's exact dating in the decades to come—Joseph Justus Scaliger, Johannes Kepler, and Sir Isaac Newton among them—scholars and non-academics alike commonly accepted the view of a 5,700-year-old Earth during the seventeenth century. Moreover, the idea of Young Earth Creationism retained a near monopoly until at least the end of the eighteenth century. Indeed, James Hutton's nearly unreadable *Theory of the Earth*, published in 1795, was among the first formal and forceful arguments against the theory of Young Earth Creationism. However, there can be

no doubt that the "Young Earth" theory was one that most accepted as scientific fact, both in the United Kingdom—Hutton was a Scotsman by birth and locale—and in the United States during the time Peale was active exhuming the fossilized remains of a mastodon skeleton in upstate New York. Clearly, the idea of a "Young Earth" seems to clash with the very idea of fossilization. Without doubt, the length of time it takes for organic matter to chemically transform into a fossil far exceeds the amount of time the Young Earth Creationists believed God's entire creation itself had existed.[3]

However, there is another "scientific" principle that was commonly accepted during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that further adds to the understanding of Peale's *The Exhumation of the Mastodon*, a concept called The Great Chain of Being. Perhaps the most important text on this subject is Arthur O. Lovejoy's *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea*. Although initially published in 1936 as a result of a series of lectures the author delivered at Harvard University as part of the William James Lectures on Philosophy and Psychology, *The Great Chain of Being* remains the definitive scholastic source on the topic. In it, Lovejoy chronicles both the birth and the eventual modification of this particular philosophical idea. Given its importance and acceptance during the eighteenth century and the way in which it so prominently contributes to the understanding of *The Exhumation of the Mastodon*, a brief discussion of the Great Chain of Being is of the utmost importance.

According to Lovejoy, "It was in the eighteenth century that the conception of the universe as a Chain of Being, and the principles which underlay this conception—plenitude, continuity, gradation—attained their widest diffusion and acceptance" (183). These three concepts deserve a brief explanation. The concept of *plenitude* involved the great variety and abundance of life, and was used as justification for the idea of *continuity*, the notion that every kind of organism ever created by the Divine Maker still exists in an original and unchanged form. *Gradation* was a pre-Darwinian word used to demonstrate the relatedness of the animal kingdom. When put together, plenitude, continuity, and gradation helped explain, for the eighteenth-century mind at least, the natural world in which they lived. One could begin with the simplest organism then known, ascend a single rung of the animal-kingdom ladder to a slightly

[3] To be fair, a visit to the Creation Museum in Petersburg, Kentucky, will make it clear that twenty-first-century Young Earth Creationists have found clever ways of explaining the fossil record given a 6,000-year-old Earth.

more complicated organism. This process of ascension could be repeated *ad infinitum* until the ladder of animal creation would eventually progress, through small, imperceptible steps, to God's most perfect earthly creation, Man.

Perhaps the most important of these three principles when considering Peale's *The Exhumation of the Mastodon* is that of continuity, a concept that conveniently meshed with a 5,800-year-old view of the Earth. Indeed, continuity assumes that all animals that existed at the moment of creation still existed in the eighteenth century in a completely unchanged state. The processes of evolution or adaptation were incompatible with the Great Chain of Being, for it supposes that God had made an imperfect organism, one that required modification after its initial creation. Given this view, the concept of extinction was untenable: God would not create any organism only later to destroy it, for this would indicate a sense of fallibility, an idea far removed from the eighteenth-century theological mindset. Edmund Law, the future Bishop of Carlisle, wrote in 1732 that

> there is no manner of chasm or void, no link deficient in this great chain of beings, and the reason of it, it will appear extremely probable that every distinct order, every class of species of them, is as full as the nature of it would admit, or God saw proper. (qtd. in Lovejoy 185)

It is important to note here that the Great Chain of Being was not solely a Deist mindset, but one prominent theologians across the Atlantic Isles and the Continent fully accepted without reservation. As the example of Bishop Law above makes clear, the Great Chain of Being was one of the prevailing theological and intellectual mindsets of the eighteenth century. Lovejoy's emphasis on this point is so remarkably strident it is worth directly quoting:

> Nevertheless, there has been no period in which writers of all sorts—men of science and philosophers, poets and popular essayists, deists and orthodox divines—talked so much about the Chain of Being, or accepted more implicitly the general scheme of ideas connected with it, or more boldly drew from these their latent implications or apparent implications. Addison, King, Bolingbroke, Pope, Haller, Thomson, Akenside, Buffon, Bonnet, Goldsmith, Diderot, Kant, Lambert, Herder, Schiller—all these and a host of lesser writers not only expatiated upon the theme but drew from it new, or previously evaded, consequences . . . (183–84)

Clearly, the concept of the Great Chain of Being in general, and its main tenet of continuity more specifically, was a deeply held notion during the years immediately preceding Peale painting *The Exhumation of the Mastodon*, and during the decades surrounding the artist's intellectual development.

Even so developed an intellectual as Thomas Jefferson believed in the underlying notions of the Great Chain of Being. In 1781, the then Governor of Virginia wrote the first draft of *Notes on the State of Virginia*; subsequent revisions in 1782–83 and a move to Paris to assume the post of Ambassador to France allowed him to anonymously publish this dissertation in 1784. Jefferson wrote *Notes* as a defence to the questions François Barbé-Marboism and the Comte de Buffon presented about the flora and fauna in the New World. Jefferson wrote, "[T]he opinion advanced by the Count de Buffon, is…[t]hat the animals common to the old and new world, are smaller in the latter" (47). Such a claim so infuriated the future president that he dispatched John Sullivan, a former Major General in the Continental Army, to lead twenty army regulars into the New Hampshire woods to find a suitably majestic North-American mammal to present to the Comte de Buffon. Two weeks later, Sullivan returned with an impressive moose, which sadly lacked an equally impressive set of antlers. Perhaps as a compromise, Sullivan sent along an alternate set of antlers from an elk to attach to the moose's skull (Bryson 80).

For Jefferson, then, the mastodon was, among other things, tangible proof of the vibrancy of North American mammilla. In *Notes*, Jefferson belabours the point, writing, "The skeleton of the mammoth (for so the incognitum has been called) bespeaks an animal of six times the cubic volume of the elephant, as Mons[ieur] de Buffon has admitted" (45). Furthermore, Jefferson contends the United States was so vast and unexplored that herds of the Great Incognitum still roamed North America. His deductive powers placed faith in the Great Chain of Being:

> The white bear of America is as large as that of Europe. The bones of the Mammoth which have been found in America, are as large as those found in the old world. It may be asked, why I insert the Mammoth as if it still existed? I ask in return, why I should omit it, as if it did not exist? Such is the economy of nature, that *no instance can be produced of her having permitted any one race of her animals to become extinct; of her having formed any link in her great work so weak as to be broken.* (53–54, emphasis added)

So convinced was Jefferson of the existence of the mastodon that finding "the remains and accounting of any [species] which may be deemed rare or extinct" was one of the charges given to Meriwether Lewis and William Clark during their 1804–06 exploration of the American west following the Louisiana Purchase (Thomson 40). Following their return, Jefferson again dispatched Clark westward, asking him to excavate at the Big Bone Lick site in what is now modern-day Kentucky (40).

Peale and Jefferson had something else in common aside from their mutual interest in mastodons: they were both committed Deists. For both Jefferson and Peale—and like-minded Enlightenment-era Deists such as Voltaire, Rousseau, and Thomas Paine—Deism had several main tenets. The first was a general belief in (to use William Paley's term) a Divine Watchmaker that both created the universe and designed the rules that governed its existence, but did not interfere with the day-to-day lives of his creations. A second principle was the belief in the power of reason over that of faith. A final fundamental truth for the sake of this discussion involves the fact that Deists broadly rejected organized religion and narratives, especially those concerned with the account of Creation in the Book of Genesis.

Few scholars have written on Peale's religious views. David C. Ward, Historian and Deputy Editor of the Peale Family Papers at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C., describes Peale as a man "with no religious faith" (81). It is Ward who has written the most succinct account of Peale's Deism. One paragraph in particular is worthy of an extensive quotation:

> Baptized in the Church of England, Peale flirted with membership in several churches, especially Episcopalian and Quaker; attended the services of various denominations; and was married (and, as a widower, remarried) by clergymen of each wife's faith. Peale's participation in religion was limited to intellectual interest and a desire not to disturb the proprieties; rather than list his children in the family Bible, he listed them in Pilkington's *Dictionary of Artists*. Instead of adopting an institutionalized faith, Peale was a Deist of an almost pure variety in that, having posited the existence of a God whose benevolence was manifest in all the works of nature, he saw no need for further intermediaries between man and God. (81)

Given these views, it is not surprising that Peale only occasionally turned his artistic talents towards religious subjects. He painted a small copy of Benjamin West's *Elisha Restoring to Life the Shunammite's Son* (1767) while a student in West's London studio, and later made a copy

of Charles Catton's *Noah and His Ark* in 1819 to display in the Peale Museum. Yet such compositions do not indicate that Peale adhered to any particular dogmatic faith tradition. Several reasons easily explain the few religious works within Peale's *oeuvre*. First, eighteenth-century art students often copied the "Old Masters," and given what we know of Benjamin West, it is not surprising that he had students copy his own compositions. Second, it is likely that Peale somewhat identified with the Old Testament figure of Noah. Like Noah, Charles Willson was the patriarch of a large family, who viewed his legacy as the preservation and organization of the animal kingdom. Finally, despite his apparent lack of faith, religious compositions were particularly important to the artists of the eighteenth century who aspired to paint Grand Manner historical compositions, a genre of art under which large-scale religious art was placed. When referring in his correspondence to *The Exhumation of the Mastodon* between 1806 and 1808, for example, Peale called the work a "historical" picture or painting (Miller, *Selected Papers* 259, 281, 301). All evidence indicates to Peale being a committed Deist. To again quote David C. Ward, "In all of Peale's writings, there is no discussion of any doctrinal questions, and the only mentions of Jesus are art historical" (81).

Although Peale may not have worshipped within a church, his cathedral was that of nature. That single word—Nature—appears again and again within print material advertising his museum. The first tickets for Peale's Museum, printed in 1788, feature an open work with the word "NATURE" printed across the gutter. This book seems to emanate light, almost like that of a halo. Underneath the open book are the words "The Birds & Beasts will teach thee! ADMIT the BEARER to PEALE'S MUSEUM, containing the Wonderfull [*sic*] works of NATURE!" The same open book was featured on the title page of *A Scientific and Descriptive Catalogue of Peale's Museum* from 1796, and a similarly-opened tome, this time with "NATURE and ART" written across the right-hand page, appeared in a "Magic Lanthorn" announcement from *Poulson's American Daily Advertiser* on 3 November, 1821.[4]

The concept of nature was clearly on Charles Willson Peale's mind during the majority of his adulthood, and it is under that broad umbrella that *The Exhumation of the Mastodon* must be considered. Peale was clearly a member of the Enlightenment. As a Deist, he consciously

[4] The "Magic Lanthorn" (or Magic Lantern) was a predecessor of the twentieth-century slide projector, and was used to project near-transparent images onto a screen-like surface. Peale and others utilized the magic lantern to both educate and entertain the public.

rejected the Christian doctrines that were prevalent in the United States during the early decades of the nineteenth century. Peale was thus free to reject the ideas regarding the timeline of Creation put forth by Archbishop James Ussher, a chronology established through a careful and literal translation of the Book of Genesis from the Old Testament. As such, Peale could easily conceive the earth's timeline in extending beyond a mere five and a half millennia. This is a crucial point, for as James Hutton (and others) acknowledged, even during the late eighteenth century, the process of fossilization was one that likely took tens of thousands of years, an amount of time incongruent with a "Young Earth" view of the world.

Commentary regarding another important idea lay just beneath the surface of Peale's important painting. The Great Chain of Being was perhaps one of the most widely held philosophical notions during the eighteenth century. As Arthur Lovejoy has remarked, "It was in the eighteenth century that the conception of the universe as a Chain of Being . . . attained [its] widest diffusion and acceptance" (183). The Great Chain of Being had three main tenets: plenitude (the great variety of life), continuity (the idea that all organisms created still exist), and gradation (an explanation of the relatedness of animals to those above and below them on the Great Chain). The mastodon pushed adherents of this theory into a difficult position. For to acknowledge that the mastodon existed at one time—as skeletal remains strongly indicated that it once had—was to assert that mastodons still roamed the plains and woods of North America. As no mastodons had yet been found, they were either exceptionally well hidden (a difficult feat for a beast so large), or the concept of continuity in the Great Chain of Being was an invalid supposition. If the broadside advertising the mastodon exhibit at his museum is any indication, Peale clearly believed that the monstrous quadruped was an extinct creature. An examination of the text shows that when specifically referring to the animal, Peale used the past tense:

> They [the mastodon remains] were dug up in Ulster county, (state of New York) where they must have lain certainly many hundred years ------no other vestige remains of these animals; nothing but a confused tradition among the natives of our country, which states that their existence, *ten thousand Moons ago*; but, whatever might have been the appearance of this ENORMOUS QUADRUPED when clothed with flesh, his massy bones can alone lead us to imagine; already convinced that he *was* the LARGEST of Terrestial [*sic*] Beings.[5] (qtd. in Sellers 122)

[5] Emphasis added on the final "was." Peale italicized "ten thousand Moons

Clearly, Peale's Deism did not necessitate a blind faith in the idea of continuity, for such a belief would suppose God's active involvement in the world. Instead, Peale, and his likeminded Deists, thought only of God as the Creator, not as an omnipotent meddler; for Peale, the extinction of plant and animal life was not a matter of religion, but only a matter of scientific inevitability.

Religion and science are uneasy bedfellows today, and were so during Charles Willson Peale's own lifetime as well. While Peale was a religious man—that is, he believed in a God (the capitalization of the noun is deliberate)—he did not subscribe to the Judeo-Christian version of an Almighty that should be prayed to or that needlessly interfered with people's lives. Because of his lack of faith in organized religion, Peale was free to reject dogmatic texts—the Old and New Testaments among others—and choose instead to exercise his own reason and intellect. It was this sense of reason that allowed Peale to conceive of geological time rather than a "Young Earth" view of creation. It was this sense of intellect that allowed the artist to acknowledge that animals that had once been created could later become extinct.

One can see many things when viewing Charles Willson Peale's *The Exhumation of the Mastodon*. Indeed, it is a complicated image conceived of and painted during complicated times. Among other interpretations, this work is certainly about science and religion, and how those two different fields of knowledge interacted with and informed one another during the early years of the nineteenth century. Peale's painting is not simply about digging a mastodon skeleton out of the ground in upstate New York in 1801. Indeed, the painting speaks to a rejection of an Old Testament view of creation James Ussher professed in the seventeenth century, and is a dismissal of an idea that many Christians (and, to be fair, many Deists such as Thomas Jefferson) held dear: continuity within God's Great Chain of Being.

Lillian B. Miller commented that Peale conceived this painting as a historical composition, and in many regards this is true. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the importance of history paintings resided in the ways in which they had the potential to morally instruct an art-viewing public. These were lessons Peale learned while studying painting with Benjamin West, perhaps the most famous British history

ago" in the original. It is important to note that this phrase, "ten thousand moons ago," does not indicate a lack of belief in geological time. Instead, Peale was quoting a Native American oral tradition that appeared at the top of the broadside: "TEN THOUSAND MOONS AGO, when ought but gloomy forests covered this land of the sleeping sun . . ."

painter during the latter half of the eighteenth century. In this regard, *The Exhumation of the Mastodon* unquestionably is a historical painting. However, the moral message it contains is not one about love of country, sacrifice for the sake of others or following the teachings of Jesus Christ. Instead, in *The Exhumation of the Mastodon,* Charles Willson forcefully and clearly speaks to the elevation of science, intellect, and reason over blind faith.

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Charles Willson Peale, *The Exhumation of the Mastodon*, 1806-08, oil on canvas, 49" x 61.5". Courtesy of the Maryland Historical Society