



# **Mr. Peale's Museum: Charles Willson Peale and the First Popular Museum of Natural Science and Art**

*Charles Coleman Sellers*

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**Charles Willson Peale was not only one of our finest early American painters, but also the founder of the world's first popular museum of natural science and art.**

Peale's Museum, born of the painter's revolutionary idea that museums should be for everyone?not just for scientists and connoisseurs as had always been the case?was begun in the painter-naturalist's Philadelphia home, and over a seventy-five-year span it grew to include branches in New York City and Baltimore. In its day, Peale's Museum was an institute of learning and science comparable in national prestige to the Smithsonian Institution today.

This is the story of that amazing endeavor and of the fascinating man who, virtually singlehandedly, made it happen. We see Peale, democrat to the core, pedagogue at heart, amateur yet rigorous scientist, delightful eccentric and utter optimist, bounding here and there under the impetus of his dream: to Maryland to collect birds and butterflies, up the Hudson Valley to find a mastodon's bones in a marl pit, into a New Jersey Cave to snare live rattlesnakes. We see him working night and day, painting backgrounds for his "World of Miniature" (the first time anyone had thought of displaying animal and other specimens in natural settings), mounting his finds (and inventing an improved method of taxidermy in the process), writing exhibit labels, dreaming up advertisements, and organizing his huge and rambunctious family into what must have been the most unusual museum staff of all time.

Many great Americans of the day play a role in the Museum's story. Some pose for what was, in effect, the first national portrait gallery. Others take a more active role, among them George Washington (he heads the annual membership drive and makes the first government deposit?a Hawaiian chief's costume), Franklin (who offers advice, a gift of minerals, and a French Angora cat) and Jefferson (President of the Museum's "Board of Visitors," he places trophies from the Lewis and Clark expedition in the Museum). Mr Peale's Museum quickly became a national treasure.

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