

# Once in a Lifetime: Experiencing Three Peale Portraits Close Up

By JOSEPH RUZICKA



Connoisseurs of American art and history, take heed! Now is your chance to stand face-to-face with five key figures from the War of Independence. Three full-length portraits painted by Charles Willson Peale (1741-1827) are on long-term loan to Baltimore's Maryland Historical Society, sent there from the Maryland State Archives in Annapolis, the state capital 30 miles to the south. On view are the British statesman and champion of colonial rights, *William Pitt*; one of Maryland's four signers of the Declaration of Independence, *William Paca*; and the iconic triple portrait of *Washington, Lafayette, and Tilghman at Yorktown*.<sup>1</sup>

What began as a problem-solving conversation between sister institutions has turned into a unique opportunity to closely examine masterworks that, though always on public view in Annapolis, have been challenging to see and never before displayed side by side. Now, in Baltimore, everyone can witness Peale's aesthetic development, as well as the evolving mood of the nascent American republic.

## TURNING LEMONS INTO LEMONADE

Since 2006, portions of the Maryland State House have been undergoing archeological examination and restoration. (See the sidebar on page 28.) This project has provided the Maryland State Archives, which cares not only for official documents but also fine art, with the much-needed opportunity to examine and conserve its Peales. The Pitt and Yorktown pictures have left the State House fewer than a handful of times since the 1700s. There, however, they hang well above eye level and behind stanchions, making a detailed perusal impossible. *William Paca*, on loan to the Maryland Historical Society for most of the 20th century, now rejoins his old friends for the first time in more than 100 years.

While planning their building's renovation, the Archives curators considered two options. The simplest was to store the paintings, but they elected instead to loan them for this exemplary exhibition, *Maryland's National Treasures*, which also contains more than 40 objects from the Historical Society's collection that



CHARLES WILLSON PEALE (1741-1827)

*WILLIAM PITT*

1768-1772, OIL ON CANVAS, 94 x 57 IN.

MARYLAND STATE ARCHIVES, ANNAPOLIS



CHARLES WILLSON PEALE (1741-1827)

*WILLIAM PACA*

1772, OIL ON CANVAS, 86 1/2 x 56 3/4 IN.

MARYLAND STATE ARCHIVES, ANNAPOLIS

other support. Nearby are several decorative objects associated with the Marquis de Lafayette's triumphant 1824-25 return to the U.S., including a pair of gilded French porcelain urns adorned with the likenesses of Washington and Lafayette, who had by then nearly been deified.

#### A TRIO OF MASTERWORKS

The earliest of the three Peale portraits is that of William Pitt (1708-78), begun in London in 1768 and finished in Annapolis in 1772. As the leading advocate for fair treatment of the American colonies (though not for their independence), and as a two-time prime

contextualize the lives of Peale's sitters. This is especially instructive in the case of Tench Tilghman (1744-1786), the Marylander whose story is further clarified through key loans from The Society of the Cincinnati in Washington, DC. Despite the critical role he played as Washington's aide-de-camp for five years (essentially the entire Revolutionary War), Tilghman is not well known today, perhaps due to his discretion in service, his difficult-to-decipher name (pronounced "till-man"), and the fact that he died young (and thus never saw his general become president).<sup>2</sup> Loans such as Tilghman's 1781 journal (detailing the three-week siege of Yorktown), and his silver-and-gold smallsword seen in Peale's portrait, offer new dimension to this remarkable patriot.

Works from the Historical Society's collection include the sandstone *Bust of George Washington* by Antonio Capellano (1780-1840), the Italian sculptor who created the full-length figure atop Baltimore's Washington Monument, and a 1778 letter penned by Washington at Valley Forge, pleading with mid-Atlantic colonists for provisions and



CHARLES WILLSON PEALE (1741-1827)

*WASHINGTON, LAFAYETTE, AND TILGHMAN AT YORKTOWN*

1784, OIL ON CANVAS, 96 x 63 1/2 IN.

MARYLAND STATE ARCHIVES, ANNAPOLIS



THE OLD SENATE CHAMBER IN DECEMBER 1948, WITH PEALE'S *WASHINGTON, LAFAYETTE, AND TILGHMAN AT YORKTOWN* AT RIGHT. THE CHAMBER LOOKED LIKE THIS 1940-2007. PHOTO COURTESY MARYLAND STATE ARCHIVES SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

## The Old Senate Chamber

Old buildings, like old paintings, need to be examined and restored from time to time. The Maryland State House in Annapolis was built between 1772 and 1779, and is the oldest continuously operating state capitol building in the U.S. Few Americans realize that Annapolis was their fledgling nation's capital between November 1783 and August 1784, and thus what is now called the Old Senate Chamber was temporarily the seat of the Continental Congress. In this room on December 23, 1783, Washington resigned as commander-in-chief of the Continental Army, thereby establishing civilian authority over national affairs and the military. It was also here in 1784 that Thomas Jefferson oversaw the ratification of the Treaty of Paris, officially ending the War of Independence.

The last major renovation of the Old Senate Chamber occurred in 1905. For its time, that campaign was reasonably historically accurate, reversing much of the 19th-century renovations that had so altered the room's appearance. Archeological study and archival research are now informing the Maryland State House Trust's even more faithful restoration of the chamber to its original 18th-century appearance. For details, please visit [msa.md.gov/msa/mdstatehouse/pdf/final\\_report\\_all.pdf](http://msa.md.gov/msa/mdstatehouse/pdf/final_report_all.pdf).

IN THE MARYLAND STATE HOUSE'S OLD SENATE CHAMBER, PLASTER FROM THE 1905 RENOVATION HAS BEEN REMOVED TO EXPOSE THE 18TH-CENTURY MASONRY BENEATH.





**PAIR OF URNS**

MADE IN FRANCE C. 1825, PORCELAIN,  
EACH 10 <sup>11</sup>/<sub>16</sub> IN. HIGH  
MARYLAND HISTORICAL SOCIETY, BALTIMORE



minister, Pitt is rightly imagined as a statesman of the Roman Republic, pointing to the figure of Liberty while holding a copy of the Magna Carta, the wellspring for liberty and personal freedoms in the Anglo-Saxon world.

*William Pitt* is a somber painting, even taking into account the natural dimming of its black tones over time. This darkness befits the serious nature of Pitt's contentious views, which even led him to speak out against his king. Given the narrow color range here, *William Pitt* benefits immensely from close-up examination. Details emerge from the shadows: for example, the laurel wreath next to the flame on the altar, and the architectural embellishments throughout. Peale's subtle glazing of Pitt's flesh and iridescent brushstrokes in the garments are delightfully visible, in sharp contrast to his usually smooth application. In 1774, Peale offered this painting to the colonial governor and general assembly of Maryland for the State House they were then constructing, and it has remained there ever since.

It seems that Peale was uncomfortable working in this European manner of historicizing portraiture, and he appears more assured and convincing in his portrait of William Paca (1740-1799), the friend and patron he depicts in the here and now. Paca was one of the wealthiest men in the American colonies, a staunch supporter of their liberty, and a signer of the Declaration of Independence. He later served three one-year terms as governor of Maryland. At the time of this sitting in 1772, Paca could not have anticipated the history-making events the next decade would bring him, though the bust of the Roman republican Cicero makes his politics clear.<sup>3</sup> For the time being, Paca looks resplendent in his ample affluence, filling up almost half the canvas: This is a man quite settled on, and satisfied with, his position in life.

Posed in the grounds of his Annapolis McMansion, he is dressed in luxurious silks, smooth woolens, and silver accoutrements lovingly depicted by Peale, who was much more at home with contemporary fabrics than ancient ones. The experience of lingering over this picture is highly rewarding, first to marvel at this big bear of a man, and then to luxuriate in his material splendor.

In October 1781, with the essential aid of French forces, the army led by Washington defeated the British at Yorktown, Virginia, and forced the surrender of their general, Charles Cornwallis. One month later, the Maryland General Assembly commissioned Peale to paint Washington "in grateful remembrance of that most illustrious character," a portrait destined to hang in the House of Delegates Chamber.<sup>4</sup> Thus did Maryland acquire one of only two official portraits made of Washington before his presidency began in 1789.<sup>5</sup> Peale took three years to complete this commission, which was installed in 1784. Wishing to create a singular composition for his native state, he made it more specific to Yorktown, and more meaningful to Marylanders, by adding both the French General Lafayette and Lt. Colonel Tilghman, as well as a sketch in the background of the final action at Yorktown.<sup>6</sup>

The cool monumental power of this painting contrasts with the somber dutifulness of *William Pitt* and the Rococo airiness of *William Paca*. Washington dominates the composition, posed dead center and taller than his two friends; clearly this trio's triumph is complete and passing into the history books before our eyes. Washington seems apart and imperturbable, staring through, rather than engaging, the viewer. Lafayette stands in shadowy focus behind the two Americans, murmuring to them and gesturing with his hand. He also looks at the viewer but, in contrast to Washington's, his gaze is warm and captivating. Tilghman stands in profile, looking offstage in silent deference to his superiors. In his hand, however, is a critical document: the Articles of Capitulation signed by Cornwallis that effectively ended hostilities. Indeed, it was Tilghman's privilege, granted by Washington, to deliver this notice of surrender to the Continental Congress.

## SILVER LININGS

In our own lean times, cultural institutions such as the Maryland State Archives and Maryland Historical Society are confronting, without a roadmap, a bewildering array of options for future programming, audience development, and funding. One silver lining in this economic cloud is the opportunity to re-examine their primary purpose; for collection- and research-driven institutions, this is the care, display, and interpretation of the objects they hold in trust for their public. An exhibition such as *Maryland's National Treasures* puts into practice this kind of rethinking, resulting in an instructive, enjoyable, and truly once-in-a-lifetime experience. ■

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**Information:** *Maryland's National Treasures* is on view at the Maryland Historical Society, 201 W. Monument Street, Baltimore, MD 21201, 410.685.3750, mdhs.org

## Endnotes

- 1 See Elaine Rice Bachmann, "Charles Willson Peale's Portrait of George Washington for the Maryland State House: 'Something better than a mere copy,'" *The Magazine Antiques*, CLXXI (Feb 2007): 66-71.
- 2 For Tilghman, see the Maryland Online Encyclopedia at [mdoe.org/tilghmantench.html](http://mdoe.org/tilghmantench.html). See also Emily L. Schultz, *Maryland in the American Revolution* (exh. cat., Washington, DC: The Society of the Cincinnati, 2009): 19-23, 29, 31, 41-2.
- 3 In 1756, Paca led protests against the Stamp Act and later helped organize a chapter of the Sons of Liberty. For Paca, see the Maryland Online Encyclopedia at [mdoe.org/pacawilliam.html](http://mdoe.org/pacawilliam.html).
- 4 *Journal of the House of Delegates*, p. 9, Nov. 23, 1781. Early State Records Collection, Special Collections 4872, Maryland State Archives, Annapolis. Published in The Archives of Maryland Online, Legislative Records Series.
- 5 Bachmann, 67. The Pennsylvania Legislature ordered the other portrait of Washington while he was still commander-in-chief (*George Washington at Princeton*, also by C.W. Peale). It is now in the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. See Bachmann endnotes 5 and 17.
- 6 Bachmann, 67, 69-70.

AFTER A DRAWING ATTRIBUTED TO CHARLES WILLSON PEALE (1741-1827)  
**A FRONT VIEW OF THE STATE-HOUSE ETC. AT ANNAPOLIS THE CAPITAL OF MARYLAND**  
1789, ENGRAVING IN COLORS, FROM *COLUMBIAN MAGAZINE*, VOL. 3, FEBRUARY 1789  
MARYLAND HALL OF RECORDS, ANNAPOLIS

