



Built to Last

No. 1

Peale Museum

225 North Holliday Street, Baltimore (1804-6, Robert Cary Long, Sr.; 1930, John Henry Scarff, architects)

Excerpt from the full report written by Laurie Ossman, Ph.D., for HABS

Quite possibly the first “purpose-built” museum building in the United States, the Peale Museum is associated with two prominent members of the Peale artistic dynasty: Rembrandt (who commissioned it in 1813) and Rubens (who managed the museum until it was forced to relocate 1829). Rembrandt Peale founded the gas company in Baltimore and his museum building was the first structure in the city to have gas lighting. The structure has served a variety of important civic functions including housing Baltimore’s City Hall (1830-78); Baltimore’s “Colored” School No. 1 (1878-89); and the municipal museum (1931-96).

The Peale Museum is one of the few surviving structures associated with Baltimore architect Robert Cary Long, Sr. Reconstructed in 1930-1 by architect John Henry Scarff, later the district officer for the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) in Maryland, the building today is a remarkable example of Colonial Revival restoration theory and practice in the 1930s.

Colonial Revival architecture and design does not rely solely on models created prior to July 4, 1776. Extensive research and study in the last decade have demonstrated that, in its regional manifestations, the Colonial Revival may refer to culturally-constructed eras “as late as” the immediate *ante bellum* years in the deep South. Thus, while the Peale Museum building was originally built in 1813-4, the civic perceptions and historical processes by which it has



Peale Museum, west facade. James W. Rosenthal, photographer, Summer 2001.

been enshrined as a pre-eminent emblem of Baltimore’s “golden age” are those of the Colonial Revival.

The decades immediately before and after the War of 1812 marked one peak of Baltimore’s fits-and-starts commercial growth but a particularly distinct moment in its cultural aspirations. The city assumed a mantle of cosmopolitanism, coincident with the Neo-Classical and Federal styles in architecture. Perhaps because of the patriotic associations of this period with the city’s bombardment—and survival—during the War of 1812, this era has assumed a definitive, mythic status in the cultural consciousness

of Baltimore as the city’s “Golden Age.” The Peale Museum has, through historical processes associated with Colonial Revivalism, become a focal monument of civic identity.

A Building Inspector’s report of 1878 indicates that the building was perceived as having historic value almost immediately after the National Centennial in 1876 (the conventional starting point of Colonial Revival in America). It is not clear, however, how much of that perceived value was due to the associations with the Peale Museum or with the later offices of city government. By 1906, however, the

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Peale associations are clearly gaining ascendancy, suggesting that Baltimore's historical consciousness had begun to focus on the Federal period for its chosen definitive past.

By 1930, the Peale assumed many applied meanings. A sample of the contemporary press coverage reveals a cross-section of issues and values received apotheosis in the perception of the Peale: Modern methodological rigor and the authenticity of the recreated past (*pace* Colonial Williamsburg); civic boosterism; a local legacy of gentility and good taste.

Press coverage of the 1930 restoration emphasized architect Scarff's research and scholarship in "restoring" the building in near-heroic terms. Perhaps influenced by the work at Colonial Williamsburg, the newspaper accounts of the Peale Museum "restoration" take pains to attest to the scholarly methods and accuracy of the result. Where scholarly evidence did not suffice, wishful thinking ensured that the Peale Museum would depict Baltimore's past as the Baltimore of the 1930s wanted it to have been. Although Scarff himself clearly preferred the term "reconstruction," the popular word choice "restoration" indicates a willful desire on the part of Baltimore to believe in the genuineness of the building as it appeared in 1931, as well as a certain tacit desire to presume upon this idealized past as a role model for the present. The fact that the Peale Museum "restoration" occurred during the Depression also explains why the building's associations with a bygone age of prosperity and gentility received so much emphasis in the press.

While the Colonial and Federal styles may seem antithetical to Modernism, the coincident distaste for the perceived clutter and over-elaboration of the preceding Victorian era marked the taste-based

rhetoric of the Peale "restoration" in 1930. The press accounts also emphasized the Peale's importance—as both a museum and as an architectural artifact—as an emblem of Baltimore's gentility. Such emphasis dovetailed with stereotypical Colonial Revival rhetoric of selecting certain segments of the past to reinforce the validity of contemporary conceptions of one's age and values. While the original Peale museum followed in the tradition of "Cabinets of Curiosities" and showed a variety of scientific, archaeological, natural and performance-based attractions in addition to fine art (leading Rubens to refer to the institution as "the circus"), the reconstituted Museum of 1931 was all about high-style portraits, fine furnishings and antique silver. Although the original Peale museum combined high art and popular entertainment—and struggled to make ends meet—visitors to the Peale Museum in 1931 were greeted with the strains of chamber music, the door held for them by footmen attired in period livery.

A final noteworthy aspect of the Peale reconstruction of the 1930s is the extensive use of salvage materials, both in the building itself and in the installation of the Union Bank pediment in the garden. Further research may determine if Scarff's use of relics of Baltimore's past monuments was conceptually indebted to the renowned courtyard at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, which presented architectural fragments of monuments as not only a gallery of aesthetic and didactic objects, but as inspirational models and a dictionary of motifs for new design. Certainly, the re-use of parts of prominent buildings then being demolished in the new municipal museum suggests that Scarff knowingly created a pastiche of Baltimore's best buildings (thus preserving some elements of houses that would have otherwise been lost without a trace), while the press and

public chose to see it as a meticulously recaptured relic of the genteel past.

The complete report for this structure, including bibliographic citations and references, may be obtained from the Historic American Buildings Survey beginning in September 2002. Copies of this information sheet may be downloaded at no cost from the HABS web site:

www.cr.nps.gov/habsbaer/habs/

During the summer of 2001, the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) and the Maryland Historical Trust, in coordination with the City of Baltimore's Commission for Historical and Architectural Preservation (CHAP) and Preservation Maryland, recorded ten historic buildings and sites within Baltimore's Central Business District through large-format photography and original historical research. The heart of the downtown area and focus of intensive redevelopment efforts, Baltimore's Central Business District is a designated city historic district and home to a diverse array of historic commercial and civic buildings, churches, theaters and other landmarks. Many of them predate the district's Great Fire of 1904 and chronicle Baltimore's rise as a financial, commercial and civic center. This project, resulting in more than 150 photographs by Baltimore photographer James W. Rosenthal for HABS and ten detailed architectural histories by Laurie Ossman, PhD., also a Baltimore resident, grew out of concern about the recent loss of the Merchants & Miners Transportation Company Building at 17 Light Street and other buildings of architectural distinction in Baltimore.

Ranging chronologically from the Peale Museum (1814) to the Bank of America Building (1929; formerly the Baltimore Trust Company Building), and in function from Old St. Paul's Church (1846) to the Gayety Theatre (1906), the ten landmarks selected for this study illustrate the architectural diversity of the district and the myriad forces that have informed the district's growth and evolution over time. The exhibit, launched at the Maryland Historical Society in May 2002 during National Historic Preservation Month, and the companion walking tour provide a glimpse into the architectural history of Baltimore's Central Business District. It is hoped that the exhibit and brochure will encourage further exploration and preservation of Baltimore's tremendously rich architectural heritage.