12: Rubens Peale *Still Life Number 26: Silver Basket of Fruit* (1857–58)

Susan Nurse

The Memorial Art Gallery's *Still Life* by Rubens Peale is one of over 130 paintings produced by this member of America's "First Family of Artists" during the last years of his life. Like Anna Robertson "Grandma" Moses in the twentieth century, Peale did not begin to paint until his seventy-first year and he did not approach painting as a profession but for the pure joy of creating.

Rubens Peale was the fourth of seventeen children of Charles Willson Peale (1741–1827),[1] an energetic artist, philanthropist, and zoologist. Of Charles's large family at least ten became painters, including a brother, four sons (all named for famous painters), several nieces, and a nephew.[2] Thus Rubens was early and often exposed to art and the art of observation. Having a fragile physical nature in early childhood and hampered throughout his life with poor eyesight, he was not given formal artistic training like his famous brothers Raphaelle and Rembrandt but was trained to run another of the father's enthusiasms, the family museums. Charles Willson Peale's Philadelphia museum was a mixture of portraits and paintings by family members, curiosities of nature, both fauna and flora, art exhibits of "old masters" borrowed from prominent friends, and a venue for lectures.[3] To his role as head of two family museums and then his own in New York City,[4] Rubens brought his exactitude for observation, taxidermy skills, and showmanship—aided by special glasses he himself invented.[5]

Facing enforced retirement in his middle fifties, Rubens turned to his wife's family, who provided the Peales with "Woodland Farm" in Schuylkill County, Pennsylvania. There he successfully brought to farming his early love of botany and his museum training as an intense, inquisitive observer of natural forms. His sons did much of the heavy labor, but Rubens supervised the crops and animals, and tended all the gardens, both vegetable and flower. With this success, he was able to send his only daughter, Mary Jane, to Philadelphia to study painting with her uncle Rembrandt.

On October 22, 1855, at the age of seventy-one, Rubens began a daily detailed journal of the life of the farm, including his newfound hobby, painting.[6] It may have been the return of Mary Jane to the farm to help take care of her parents that began the process. Her enthusiasm and encouragement apparently helped Rubens overcome his reluctance to test his artistic abilities against his much more famous and talented family members. In fact, many of the paintings that he made as gifts were met with surprised enthusiasm, not only for his long hidden talent but also for his courage at producing works of art at his age.

The fidelity to life Peale brings to the fruits in MAG's *Still Life Number 26* hardly seems the work of an amateur. His memory of the specimens had to be very keen for him to produce a painting whose fruit looks fresh enough to eat. It certainly appears to have been done with the fruit sitting in front of him, but in fact, since he had no private space in the farmhouse for a studio, the opportunities for setting up his homemade "ezel" and paint box could easily be disrupted by visiting family or friends, sometimes for weeks at a time.[7] His first priority was always his responsibilities on the farm.

Under these circumstances, it is all the more surprising that Rubens was able, in the last ten years of his life, to produce over 130 works, of which 95 were still lifes. Only five were produced on tin, like MAG's painting. In a practice carried over from his museum days, he gave specific numbers rather than names to each work. The number 26 duly appears in the front right corner of MAG's

Still Life. We know from Rubens's journal that his son George prepared the tin for the final painting by putting in the ground of brown and green.[8] Rubens may have made for George a preliminary drawing of the placement of the objects, or he may have drawn on the tin itself. In either case, the details of the fruit must have been executed from memory, with typically careful attention to blemishes and skin coloration.

There is no wild profusion of fruits as in many still lifes traditionally—no clusters of grapes, for instance, overflowing onto the table. Indeed all the fruit is contained in the basket: respectable, solidly modeled, carefully individuated all-American standards, a central apple surrounded by pears and a peach, plus a sprig of cherries drooping somewhat rakishly off to one side. This cool simplicity—or perhaps modesty—plus the lack of all background details, allows the silver basket itself to dominate the scene.

Rembrandt Peale,
1778–1860
Rubens Peale with a Geranium
(detail), 1801
Oil on canvas, 28⅛ x 24 in.
Patrons' Permanent Fund,
Image ©Board of Trustees,
National Gallery of Art,
Washington, D.C., 1985.59.1

The surface on which the basket sits seem tipped forward, but the basket itself is seen straight on. The light comes from the front and the left side, to judge by the highlights on the fruit and the shadows cast by the basket. Curiously, no shadows are cast by the cherries, which Rubens perhaps added later without making any changes in the basket. It is true that he used paint sparingly, adding thin layers to enhance the shading. (When receiving lessons on landscape painting he was shocked at the amount of paint applied by the artist and then scraped off again for effect.)[9]

The basket is of particular interest. Rubens sometimes copied works by other members of the Peale family as a way of learning painting. He was particularly drawn to the works of his uncle James and his brother Raphaelle. The same silver basket was painted by James in a painting called *Fruit and Grapes* (ca. 1820, private collection), which was owned by Rubens's eldest son, Charles Willson,[10] and which Rubens copied in another of his paintings, *Basket of Peaches with Ostrich Egg and Cream Pitcher* (1856–59, private collection).[11] It is almost identical to the oval wire bread basket made by British silversmith Matthew Boulton in 1788.[12] The design is based on forms made popular by Robert Adam deriving from antiquity with its clean lines and fine proportions. While the "Adam style" was hugely popular and influential in England and America from the 1760s on, it was out of fashion by the time Rubens Peale used it. By the 1850s, America's taste in still lifes was changing to much larger and more elaborate works, reflecting the increasing affluence and refinement of American homes and the influence of European training on American artists.[13] Peale's relative isolation on the farm screened him from these changing tastes, with the result that his works, like this one, retain an unusual freshness and simplicity.

(Facing page)
Rubens Peale,
1784–1865
Still Life Number 26: Silver Basket of Fruit, 1857–58
Oil on tin, 13 x 19 in.
Gift of Miss Helen C. Ellwanger, 64.40

Still Life Number 26 descended in the Peale family until given to Miss Helen Ellwanger, the donor to the Memorial Art Gallery. Miss Ellwanger was the daughter of George Ellwanger, co-founder in Rochester of the Ellwanger & Barry Nursery, the most prolific producer of seeds and horticultural supplies in the world at the time. It is fitting that the work of Rubens, a studier of seeds and planting and an observer of nature, should have been donated by a descendant of the famous nineteenth-century nurseryman.

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