



CHARLES WILLSON PEALE
Mrs. James Smith and Grandson, 1776

CHARLES WILLSON PEALE (1741–1827)

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oil on canvas, 36 ³/₈ × 29 ¹/₄ in.

Smithsonian American Art Museum,

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Wilson Levering Smith Jr.
and museum purchase

Background Information for Teachers

Charles Willson Peale's double portrait captures the strong affection between a grandmother and her grandson, and with light and color heightens the contrast between age and youth, past and future. Mrs. James Smith's figure is set against a dark background, and her clothing is dark and somber. A light shines down on her grandson Campbell, casting him in a golden glow and highlighting his bright blue jacket, the embroidered flowering vines of his vest symbolizing new growth and potential.

In 1776 the American colonies were fighting to establish their independence from Great Britain. Campbell leans toward his grandmother, eager to show her what he has learned. He holds *The Art of Speaking*, a manual of rhetoric and oratorical study. Oratory, the art of formal public speaking, was a highly prized skill in colonial America, particularly for men hoping to enter politics or law. Campbell rests his finger on the famous soliloquy "To be, or not to be" from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Peale's choice to have the book open to this passage can be interpreted in multiple ways. Perhaps the artist wished to allude to family aspirations for Campbell's future—whether or not his education would prepare him for a career in law or politics.

When we consider that the artwork was painted in Philadelphia in 1776, an added layer of meaning is revealed. "To be, or not to be" could refer to revolutionary ideals for a new nation. Peale, who was a lieutenant in the Philadelphia city militia, was well aware of the instability of the republic. The colonies had just declared independence from Great Britain and the future of the young country was uncertain. Was the dream of independence to be, or not to be? Perhaps the artist speculates whether the boy will grow up to be a leader who will safeguard the fledgling democracy.

Peale's depiction of his sitters seems to allude to the major changes the American colonies faced at the onset of the Revolution. The grandmother represents the colonial past, while her grandson embodies the nation's hopes for a brighter future.

Guided Looking Questions for Students

- ▶ Portraits often contain clues about the sitter(s) and the time in which they lived. What clues can you find in this painting, and what do you think they signify?
- ▶ How might this painting stand for the past and the present? What significance does its date of creation, 1776, add to your reading of the painting?
- ▶ The boy points to the opening line in Hamlet's famous monologue, "To be, or not to be." Consider the symbols you've just uncovered as well as the date of the painting. Why do you think Campbell points to this particular line? (There can be multiple reasons.)

Primary Source Connection

Pair this artwork with a letter Abigail Adams wrote to her husband, John Adams, on July 21, 1776. John Adams's political career often took him away from his home in Massachusetts for long stretches of time. During those periods, he and Abigail exchanged many letters containing news and advice on familial and political matters. In the following excerpt, Abigail recounts hearing the Declaration of Independence read to the crowds gathered at the State House in Boston:

Last Thursday after hearing a very Good Sermon I went with the Multitude into Kings Street to hear the proclamation for independence read and proclaimed... When Col. Crafts read from the Belcona [balcony] of the State House the Proclamation, great attention was given to every word. As soon as he ended, the cry from the Belcona was God Save our American States and then 3 cheers which rended the air, the Bells rang, the privateers fired, the forts and Batteries, the cannon were discharged, the platoons followed and every face appeared joyfull. Mr. Bowdoin then gave a sentiment, "Stability and perpetuity to American independence." After dinner, the King's Arms were taken down from the State House and every vestige of him from every place in which it appeared and burnt in King Street. Thus ends royall authority in this State. And all the people shall say Amen... We have in [King George]... a Wretch Callous to every Humane feeling. Our worthy preacher told us that he believed one of our Great Sins for which a righteous God has come out in judgment against us, was our Biggoted attachment to so Wicked a Man. May our repentance be sincere.

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Suggested Questions

- What does Abigail Adams mean by her last sentence, “May our repentance be sincere”?
- Like this letter, Peale’s painting was made around the time Congress signed the Declaration of Independence, an important step toward creating the United States. How does this letter add to our understanding of the painting, particularly the painting’s mood?

Literary Connection

Pair this artwork with the section “Thoughts on the Present State of American Affairs” from Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense*. Philosopher Thomas Paine wrote the two most influential pamphlets of the American Revolution: *Common Sense* and *The American Crisis*. *Common Sense*, published anonymously in January 1776, uses Enlightenment rhetoric to lay out the case for American independence. With over half a million copies appearing throughout the colonies within the first year, the pamphlet helped tip popular sentiment toward revolution and independence. Charles Willson Peale, a patriot in favor of independence from Great Britain, likely read the pamphlet.

Common Sense is an excellent example of persuasive writing. The following excerpt focuses on refuting the other side’s arguments, and students should be able to identify several rhetorical devices that Paine used to state his case:

In the following pages I offer nothing more than simple facts, plain arguments, and common sense: and have no other preliminaries to settle with the reader, than that he will divest himself of prejudice and prepossession, and suffer his reason and his feelings to determine for themselves: that he will put on, or rather that he will not put off, the true character of a man, and generously enlarge his views beyond the present day... I have heard it asserted by some, that as America has flourished under her former connection with Great Britain, the same connection is necessary towards her future happiness, and will always have the same effect. Nothing can be more fallacious than this kind of argument. We may as well assert that because a child has thrived upon milk, that it is never to have meat, or that the first twenty years of our lives is to become a precedent for the next twenty... Small islands not capable of protecting themselves, are the proper objects for kingdoms to take under their care; but

there is something very absurd, in supposing a continent to be perpetually governed by an island. In no instance hath nature made the satellite larger than its primary planet, and as England and America, with respect to each other, reverse the common order of nature, it is evident they belong to different systems: England to Europe, America to itself.

Suggested Questions

- Ask students to highlight Paine’s statement of purpose for this section of his pamphlet, the analogies he used to describe Great Britain’s relationship with its American colonies, and his responses to the other side’s arguments. What do you think is Paine’s strongest argument?
- Paine compares the relationship between Great Britain and its colonies to that of a parent with a child. Compare the qualities of the familial relationship implied in Peale’s painting with the qualities of the relationship between Britain and its colonies, as described by Paine.

To read the full text of extended quotes, visit:

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