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DECEMBER 2005



Rembrandt Peale (1778-1860), *Rubens Peale with a Geranium*.  
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# Rembrandt Peale (1778-1860)

## Rubens Peale with a Geranium (1801)

**P**ARENTS COMMUNICATE THEIR ASPIRATIONS for their children in various ways. Charles Willson Peale was not subtle; he named 6 of his 17 children Raphaelle, Rembrandt, Rubens, Titian, Angelica Kauffmann, and Sophonisba Angusciola. The strategy worked. Three of them grew up to be professional artists, including Rembrandt Peale, who painted this affectionate portrait of his 17-year-old brother Rubens when the artist was 23.

Rubens Peale, however, was cursed with bad eyesight and frail health as a young boy. Barely able to see the letters in books, he struggled in school and at drawing. Encouragement to persist in his efforts came from no less a source than Benjamin Franklin, a visitor to the Peale household, but Rubens came to realize that his natural gifts lay elsewhere. As early as age 10, he showed unusual talent at growing plants and raising birds. The portrait shows him gently probing the soil around a rare variety of geranium with 2 fingers of his right hand, a keen sense of touch helping to compensate for his poor vision.

How did a boy so young develop such an interest in rare plants and birds? It helped that he grew up in a museum. His father Charles founded the Philadelphia Museum in 1784 as a business and his family lived right in the building. In the spirit of the Age of Enlightenment, the museum sought to be “a world in miniature,” its collection including exotic plants and stuffed animals, historical artifacts from the Lewis and Clark Expedition, scientific instruments, works of art, and more. For 25 cents admission, parents in postcolonial Philadelphia could bring their children for both instruction and entertainment.

Although they pursued different careers, the 2 brothers Rembrandt and Rubens remained close and shared adventures. Later in 1801, both got involved in another of their father’s projects excavating 2 mastodon skeletons in upstate New York—truly a mammoth undertaking. They sailed with the ancient bones to England, where Rembrandt studied old European masters while Rubens ran a mastodon exhibit and learned about British museum management. Later, they directed a new museum in Baltimore, Md, and Rubens set up and ran another in New York.

Economic hard times hurt museum patronage badly. Eventually the family had to close the museums and sell most of their holdings to showman P. T. Barnum. Many of the artifacts subsequently perished in a warehouse fire. Fortunately, much of the Peale art collection was purchased by the city of Philadelphia and can still be seen in art museums and in Independence National Historical Park.

In retirement, Rubens could no longer resist the fate conferred on him by the name his father had chosen for him and he took up painting. In the last decade of his life, he painted over 130 canvases—still lifes, flower paintings, and landscapes showing gardens that he himself had planted as a boy.

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*Star Wars* raised our boys, taught them how to read and do math, and put them on the fast track to an interest in computer science.

—Letter to the editor in *Time* magazine, May 30, 2005