

*Mermaids, Mummies and Mastadons: The Emergence of the American Museum*, William T. Alderson, editor, for the Baltimore City Life Museums. (Washington, DC: American Association of Museums) 1992.

This wonderfully illustrated book about the Peales and their museums in New York, Philadelphia and Baltimore traces the history of the early museum movement in the United States. Taking its title from an exhibit of the same name staged by the Baltimore City Life Museums, the book is a series of essays by those who in some way contributed to the development and installation of the exhibit, as well as its accompanying educational programming.

Charles Willson Peale founded his museum in Philadelphia in 1786. His son Rembrandt opened the Baltimore Museum in 1814, and Rembrandt's brother Rubens operated one in New York City beginning in 1825. The Peale Museums continued in operation until the 1850s. The Peales struggled with many of the same questions that face museum professionals and supporters today. How could the museums be funded, how could they attract more people to their museums, and what should the true purpose of the museums be? Charles Willson Peale established his museum to teach the masses about natural science, history and art. His theory was that this effort would produce a highly educated electorate, which in turn would continue to advance the principles of democracy. Using this argument, Peale appealed to both the state and federal government, advocating the support of his museum with public funding, but failed in his efforts. The elder Peale was primarily interested in promulgating information and clearly emphasized education in his exhibits, although occasionally he would allow for the staging of "rational entertainment" to provide some modicum of amusement for his audiences. His sons took other approaches to attract audiences and support their institutions. Both opened their museums as private businesses that turned a profit, and Rubens in particular specialized in displaying novelty entertainment (like Miss Honeywell who cut paper, sewed and did drawings using her mouth and feet since she was born without arms). But even Rubens failed at earning sufficient monies to sustain his museum. He closed the doors and declared personal bankruptcy in the mid-1850s. Most of the Peales' museum collections were auctioned off in 1854 to P.T. Barnum, the circus impresario. Sadly, fire destroyed much of the collections in the years following Barnum's purchase.

This book provides a very readable discussion of current day issues. It is liberally illustrated with Peale paintings, a timeline of Peale museum events, including an interesting report of the museum's annual income and expenses, and makes entertaining use of primary sources. For \$5, it's a wonderful bargain and a great addition to the library of anyone connected with museums of all kinds.

*In a sad postscript to the book's publication, the Baltimore City Life Museums closed after public funding to support operations was withdrawn.*