

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

NEWS RELEASE

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Washington, D. C. December 17, 1966. A large portrait of Benjamin and Eleanor Ridgely Laming, one of the most important paintings by the famous eighteenth-century American artist, Charles Willson Peale, has been given to the National Gallery of Art, it was announced today by the Director, John Walker.

The picture is the gift of Morris Schapiro of Baltimore. It will be placed on view Sunday (December 18) in Lobby D for a period of two weeks before it is lent for a major Peale exhibition opening at the Detroit Institute of Arts.

Charles Willson Peale (1741-1827) was an eighteenth-century version of the Renaissance man of many talents. He was, with almost equal success, inventor, museum owner, scientist, naturalist, and painter. His children Raphaele, Rembrandt, Rubens, Franklin, and Titian followed him and became artists. Considered one of the best and most prolific painters in America, Peale was active in Philadelphia during the last quarter of the eighteenth century, when he painted most of the famous men of the country for his museum in Independence Hall. He also painted the prominent citizens of Philadelphia, Annapolis, and Baltimore.

The male subject of this Peale painting, Benjamin Laming, was born in the West Indies. He came to Baltimore where he shared

in the prosperity of the city's sudden rise as a mercantile center. In 1784 he married Eleanor Ridgely, the daughter of a prominent Maryland family. After Laming died in 1792, Eleanor Ridgely Laming married James Dall and was widowed a second time. She died in 1829.

The portrait of the Lamings measures 42 x 60-1/4 inches, and shows the couple seated on a low bank in a landscape setting with a "part of Baltimore Town" in the background. A parrot, perhaps symbolic of Laming's birthplace in the West Indies, is shown at his side.

In diary notes made between September 19 and October 5, 1788, the artist records particulars of his life while painting the Laming portrait. For example, the Lamings were not always free to sit when Peale was ready, and the artist would fill the time by wandering about their estate collecting specimens for his museum--butterflies, grasshoppers, woodpeckers, frogs, and canaries. He also made a model of a windmill. The artist wrote that he had trouble with the positioning of Laming's head, which he altered once and which he felt was much improved by further work the day he finished the picture.

Black-and-white photographs and color transparencies on loan for purposes of publication are available from William W. Morrison, Assistant to the Director, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C., Area Code 202, 737-4215, ext. 225.