

# America's Earliest Museums: A Virtual Reconstruction of the Collections of Pierre Eugène Du Simitière and Charles Willson Peale

a Virtual Fellow's Forum with John C. Van Horne

A virtual fellow's forum with John C. Van Horne, Director Emeritus of the Library Company of Philadelphia, with Kathryn Gehred from the Center for Digital Editing at the University of Virginia from October 28, 2021.

**Recording available (<https://vimeo.com/640432855>)**

During the Revolutionary and Early National periods Philadelphia was not only the political center of the new United States (until 1800) and its foremost commercial city (until 1820), but also its intellectual and artistic capital. Greatly contributing to this stimulating environment were the city's – indeed America's – earliest museums open to the public, the first opened in 1782 by the eccentric Swiss collector Pierre Eugène Du Simitière (1737-1784), and a second four years later by Charles Willson Peale (1741-1827), of which Thomas Jefferson was President of the Board of Visitors from 1792. Much has been written about these two museums (especially the much better-known Peale Museum), but nowhere is there a comprehensive accounting of just what these two museums held and exhibited to the public – that is, just what could have been seen by the American and foreign visitors who experienced these wide-ranging collections.

With two colleagues – Carol Eaton Soltis, a curator of American art at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and Matthew R. Halley, an ornithologist with the Delaware Museum of Natural History, John Van Horne is creating a database and website documenting of all the identifiable contents of the two museums – paintings, prints, drawings, sculpture, other works of art, natural history specimens (both fauna and flora), Native American and other ethnographic artifacts, antiquities, curiosities, fossils, minerals, coins, books, pamphlets, maps, etc. The website was created by the Center for Digital Editing at the University of Virginia, and it will be hosted by the American Philosophical Society.

With very few exceptions, the entire contents of both museums have long ago been dispersed and lost. The searchable, sortable database/website therefore identifies the former contents by using various contemporaneous sources. The principal sources for Du Simitière are an inventory of his estate after his death in 1784; a broadside advertising the auction sale of his American Museum in 1785; and his voluminous papers

at the Library Company of Philadelphia and the Library of Congress. For Peale's Museum the principal sources are a manuscript Accessions Book; several printed *Guides* and other publications of the Museum; lists of recent donations placed in newspapers; and his autobiography, extensive correspondence, and other papers at the American Philosophical Society. Each entry will record all pertinent information as well as extracts from contemporaneous sources and the present location of anything known or discovered to have survived. The website will be illustrated with digital images of surviving artifacts and (much more frequently) of surrogates for those artifacts that have not survived. Through this digital project scholars and the general public will have access to the rich cultural world of Philadelphia during the almost half-century from the founding of Du Simitière's American Museum in 1782 until Peale's death in 1827.

### **About the Speaker**

John Van Horne is Director Emeritus of the Library Company of Philadelphia and was Editor of *The Papers of Benjamin Henry Latrobe*. During a previous ICJS fellowship he digitally reconstructed Jefferson's "3. volumes bound in Marbled paper" – a compilation of more than 800 documents from Jefferson's tenure as Secretary of State, 1790-1793 (see [jefferson3volumes.princeton.edu](http://jefferson3volumes.princeton.edu)).

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