



Rubens Peale with *Geranium* conveys the intellectual and scientific bent of Peale's brother and suggests the New World's fertile environment.

Carol Eaton Hevner, was the first full-length study of the artist. "It is now clear," Washington-based writer May says, "that over many decades of painting Rembrandt Peale produced an outstanding portrait gallery of his generation of Americans."

As a young boy in 1787, Peale watched with fascination as his father painted a portrait of George Washington, under whom the elder Peale had served. Under his father's tutelage, Rembrandt at age 13 did his first oil painting, a self-portrait; three years later, he was a professional painter. In 1795, Peale joined his father for another session with Washington. "Charles, filled with sentiment for his old friend, depicted Washington as a dignified and benevolent hero," May writes, "while his son, intent on portraying exactly what was before his eyes, painted a direct, vivid likeness of an aging subject with a lined face and uncomfortable teeth."

In 1800, supporters of Vice President Thomas Jefferson's presidential aspirations asked Peale to produce a portrait of the candidate that showed him to be other than the wild-eyed radical of Federalist imaginations. Peale obliged with

a "simple but sophisticated likeness conveying Jefferson's calm intelligence and commanding presence," and copies of the portrait were used in the successful presidential campaign. Peale's empathy for his subject was manifest. For Jefferson's second inaugural, in 1805, Peale did another portrait, this one "depicting the President as a contemplative sage ready to continue national leadership."

It has sometimes been said that Peale did all of his best work around 1800, but "[a] series of strong, perceptive portraits, executed in the 1830s, gives the lie to [that] notion," May says. Portraits of Senator John C. Calhoun and Chief Justice John Marshall, done in 1834, show the officials as "wise and controlled statesmen capable of managing the affairs of a dynamic republic."

When Peale's subject was someone who seemed to stand for "what he admired most in his native country," art critic John Russell wrote, "his talents took wing. When he wasn't, he often came on like a privileged journeyman." At his death in Philadelphia at age 83, several unfinished portraits of George Washington were on his easel.

A Classics Controversy

"Classics Illustrated" by Donna Richardson, in *American Heritage* (May-June 1993), 60 Fifth Ave., New York, N.Y. 10011.

"Mutilations!" howled critic Fredric Wertham in 1954. The object of his ire was *Classics Illustrated*, 15-cent comic-book versions of such classics as Homer's *Iliad* and Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim*. The controversial series was launched in 1941 by Albert Kantor, a Russian immigrant who believed that it would be a way of "wooing youngsters to great books." Sales peaked during the 1950s but petered out by the 1970s, done in by paperbacks and television. Now the series is being revived—and so is the controversy. Do these comic books, asks Richardson, an English professor at St. Mary's College of Maryland, get kids to read classics or "merely help students avoid tough reading assignments"?

Officials at First Publishing of Chicago—best-known for introducing *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*

to the world—instant that the revived series will be a “contribution to literacy.” And while some have questioned the preponderance of male-oriented titles in the series, the 27 titles produced thus far have been lauded by the Literacy Volunteers of America.

Critics warn of the comics’ insidious effects. *Village Voice* writer Geoffrey O’Brien charged in 1988 that the original *Classics Illustrated* sensationalized literary works by emphasizing passages with violence and sex, used language that strayed wildly from that of the original, and employed artwork that “tended toward the primitive.” The comics, admits Richardson, were sometimes ludicrous. The protagonists of *Wuthering Heights*, for instance, are, seemingly,

transported from the late-18th-century setting of the original into Victorian England. Raskolnikov’s murder confession, the climax of *Crime and Punishment*, occurs without any depiction of his inner psychological struggle, which makes it the equivalent of eggs Benedict without the eggs. Any reader relying solely on the comic version to understand a classic, she notes, will “miss half the story and most of the meaning.”

Though it is unclear how often young readers may follow the suggestion in the comics to seek out the original, Richardson thinks the comic versions could help those who do. The compression that O’Brien abhorred “sometimes clarified style that was simply bad,” and the plot lines, though flawed and

Orwell’s ‘Inheritance Plot’

Down and Out in Paris and London, first published in 1933, was George Orwell’s first book. Reconsidering it in *Partisan Review* (No. 1, 1993), Columbia University’s Steven Marcus is struck by not only how good and original the book is, but how deeply rooted in a tradition of British writing it is, too.

It is a distinguished work in the line of English writing about poverty, urban immiseration and homelessness, and is its most important modern representative. But it is also an extremely literary piece of work and belongs to a tradition of English fiction and documentary writing that uses and modernizes the classical “inheritance plot” as a means of social exploration and a device for social commentary and criticism. We find this plot in such works of fiction as Tom Jones and Oliver Twist, in which the hero, born into penurious, deprived, and lowly circumstances, discovers himself in the end as actually a gentleman by right of birth as well as character. It is further updated, as it were, in such novels as Samuel Butler’s The Way of All Flesh. . . . And it is there as well, in its most significant variant form, in the 19th-century tradition of the investigation of urban slum life, a line . . . to which such diverse

writers as Pierce Egan, Dickens, Engels, L. C. Greenwood, Jack London, and Beatrice Webb made contributions.

In this kind of writing, the middle-class explorer-investigator also, as often as not, dresses and behaves as a member of the oppressed, outcast, exploited, and penniless in order to find out how they lived and felt, and to be able to testify sympathetically about them. I call this the “inheritance plot” because there is never any doubt that these writers and characters are continually aware of their “genuine” middle-class identities. . . . The inheritance plot is, among much else, a means for dramatizing both upward and downward social mobility, for achieving perspective on the relations and differences among the classes, for asserting friendly identification between the comfortable middle and disadvantaged lower classes on the one hand, and for the reassuring devices that sustain the substantial and harsh distinctions between them on the other. In Down and Out in Paris and London, in The Road to Wigan Pier, and in Homage to Catalonia, as well as in some of his great essays on English society and culture, Orwell demonstrated that he was one of the supreme masters of these forms of social and literary representation and its last important modern practitioner.

oversimplified, allowed a young reader to navigate language that might otherwise be daunting. *Classics Illustrated's* version of *Hamlet*, for example, includes the full text of important soliloquies in side panels, with difficult words glossed at the bottom of the page.

In the video age, Richardson argues, "all means are justified that make any remotely respectable texts appear exciting and accessible." The new *Classics Illustrated* have upgraded the art, employing Gahan Wilson, for example, to illustrate Edgar Allan Poe, but to make the comics truly irresistible, Richardson suggests, First Publishing should arrange to have them "condemned from the pulpit, or sold in back alleys."

The Two Worlds Of Satyajit Ray

"Satyajit Ray: The Plight of the Third-World Artist" by Chandak Sengoopta, in *The American Scholar* (Spring 1993), 1811 Q St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20009.

When filmmaker Satyajit Ray (1921–92) died last year, not long after being awarded a special Oscar, it was said that his films were more appreciated in the United States than in his native India. That is empty self-congratulation, says Sengoopta, a Calcutta psychiatrist and journalist studying at Johns Hopkins. Ray's limited appeal in the West dramatizes the plight of the Third World artist who wishes to celebrate and explore his own culture without being imprisoned by it.

During the late 1950s and '60s, thanks to the crusading efforts of American distributor Edward Harrison, Ray's *Apu* trilogy and later *Two Daughters* (1961) were seen by sophisticated American audiences. The trilogy—*Pather Panchali* (1955), *The Unvanquished* (1956), and *The World of Apu* (1959)—chronicled the daily lives of a middle-class Bengali family across three generations, and showed the interplay of tradition and modernity, of the village and the city. *Film Quarterly* called *The World of Apu* "probably the most important single film made since the introduction of sound."

After Harrison's death in 1967, however,

commercial distribution of Ray's films in the United States petered out. Only *Distant Thunder* (1973), set during the worst famine in recent Bengali history, and *The Home and the World* (1984), about an amoral nationalist agitator, were screened in this country. Most of Ray's American admirers have actually seen only a handful of his 40-odd films.

Almost all of his films were in Bengali and explored Bengali culture—and through it such grand themes as the conflicts between tradition and modernity, the nature of religious superstition, and the position of women. As Sengoopta notes, Ray believed "that a truthful portrait of any human group . . . would bear some meaning for all human beings, across national and cultural boundaries." Although it is a cherished notion in the West that Ray and others like him are rescued by Western patronage, "this kind of audience cannot, by itself, sustain a filmmaker economically," Sengoopta observes.

That the technique of Ray's films was Western did not change the fact that they were about Bengal. "All that such a film can hope for in the West (or in other parts of India) is critical appreciation and the support and interest of a small, somewhat elite audience," Sengoopta says.

"Even within India, a regional language film is, practically speaking, a foreign film in regions other than its own," he points out. India's 20 different major languages seldom share even the same alphabet. Films in Bengali, such as Ray's, "have only one big audience: the natives of West Bengal," a small section of the vast subcontinent. It was his Bengali audience that sustained Ray financially. "This audience grew with him and to this audience the annual Ray film became the cultural event of the year." Most of his films ran for months in Calcutta.

Ray looked to the West, however, for informed criticism, Sengoopta says. But while Western reviewers appreciated his technique and style, much of the content of his films was inaccessible to them. The synthesis of East and West that Ray attempted could be fully grasped, as he himself realized, "only by someone who has his feet in both cultures." Adds Sengoopta: "In a fragmented, provincial world, the price of psychological and cultural universality"—especially for the Third World artist—"is incomplete appreciation."