

Philadelphia Museum of Art

Conservation Examination Report

Accession #: 175.1992.1
Lender: Elliff Family Historical Trust
Object: Eagle
Maker: Attributed to William Rush, American, 1756-1833
Object Date: c. 1820
Materials: Wood (pine), gilding, paint, ferrous nails and screws
Dimensions: 11 ¼" H; 41 ¼" W; 11 ½" D
Geography: Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, United States, North and Central America
Curatorial Dept.: American Art
Examined by: Jonathan Stevens,
Graduate Intern
Consulted: Behrooz Salimnejad, Senior Conservator of Furniture, PMA
Peggy Olley, Associate Conservator of Furniture, PMA
Kathy Foster, Senior Curator of American Art, PMA
Jason Wierzbicki, Conservation Photographer, PMA
Report Date: October 14, 2020



Photo by Jason Wierzbicki

Description

This giltwood eagle is carved in high relief with spread, raised wings and with tail and head facing toward PR. The eagle is perched on a naturalistic form and a backing board can be seen between its legs from the front. The eagle is oil or matte gilded overall with the exception of the head, which is burnished, and the interior of the mouth, which is painted red. The flat back of the eagle is unfinished.

Construction:

- Main body of the eagle is carved from a horizontally oriented board, possibly with glued up extensions to form the protruding neck and head.
- Wings are each made from a single piece of wood tenoned and toenailed into mortises in the body.
- There is a vertically oriented backboard screwed to the back of the eagle with a metal eye hook at its upper end; Two thinner vertically oriented strips flank the backboard and are nailed and screwed to the back of the eagle.

Coatings:

- Matte gilding over most of the surface, with ochre bole and white gesso visible in areas of loss and wear.
- Burnished gilding on outward-facing side of head.
- Interior of mouth painted red.

Inscriptions: • Typed paper label with added handwritten notations affixed to back of eagle reads:

This is one of the original thirteen Eagles, representing the American colonies, in Independence Hall, Philadelphia. It is carved of wood and gold leaf applied.

Uncle Jacob Colladay (whose wife was Julia Ann Stull) was an architect and builder and one of the founders of Carpenter's Hall, Philadelphia – his name is on the doorplate. He was commissioned to do some reconstruction work on the wings of Independence Hall. His friend, Mr. Doll, was a councilman and when the council ordered the thirteen Eagles removed, he gave Uncle Jacob three of them. This one was in my grandmother Braddock's drawing room, 1643 Vine Street, Philadelphia, for many years.

Harriet Bell Elliff

A handwritten addendum notes that Uncle John Colladay was the brother in law of Harriet Bell Elliff's grandmother.

Historical Context

Attributed to William Rush, Philadelphia born sculptor who gained renown carving figureheads and ornaments for merchant ships and went on to become a prominent artist in Philadelphia and a founding member of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (James-Gadzinski and Cunningham 1997, 10-11). This eagle's attribution to Rush has been questioned by PMA researcher Cindy Veloric, who found only circumstantial evidence and oral family tradition linking the piece to Rush (see curatorial remarks in TMS). It is unclear from TMS remarks whether evidence contradicting the attribution was found. Extensive trail of research in curatorial object file (not yet accessed).

As noted above, the paper label affixed to the back of the eagle states that the Elliff family acquired the object, one of thirteen similar eagles, following its removal from Philadelphia's Independence Hall during a reconstruction campaign (figure 7).

A carved giltwood eagle made for St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Philadelphia is the only carved eagle with firmly documented attribution to Rush (figure 8). It was commissioned in 1809 as part of the church's decorative program and was relocated to Independence Hall in 1847, when it was donated to the city of Philadelphia by St. John's church. The St. John's eagle is currently in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. A carved and painted pine eagle in the collection of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (PAFA) is also commonly attributed to Rush and may have served as a study for the St. John's eagle (figure 9). The eagles have many similarities and may have been modeled after a taxidermy eagle specimen in the museum of Rush's friend, Charles Willson Peale (Manuels and Tolles 2005, 217-233) (figure 10).

A second carved eagle in the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts collection was formerly attributed to Rush but is now thought to be by another hand (James-Gadzinski and Cunningham 1997, 10) (figure 11). This eagle has a similar pose to the Elliff family eagle (175-1992-1), but it is less naturalistic and more stiffly and formulaically carved than either the Elliff family eagle or the two known Rush eagles.

Rush clearly carved other eagles besides the two widely accepted ones at The Met and PAFA, as evidenced by an 1824 watercolor by Samuel Honeyman Kneass depicting Philadelphia's triumphal arch in honor of Lafayette, surmounted by carvings by Rush including a carved eagle at its apex (figure 11). This eagle is depicted with outstretched wings and with head and tailfeathers to its right, similar to the Elliff family eagle (Cooper 1993, 239).

It may be difficult or impossible to firmly attribute this object on the basis of carving style alone, especially when considering an artist as influential as Rush and a subject as ubiquitous in early nineteenth-century America as the eagle.

X-radiography

The object was imaged by PMA conservation photographer Jason Wierzbicki using a Carestream Industrex HPX-1 X-ray tube at 35kV 4mA for 60 seconds.

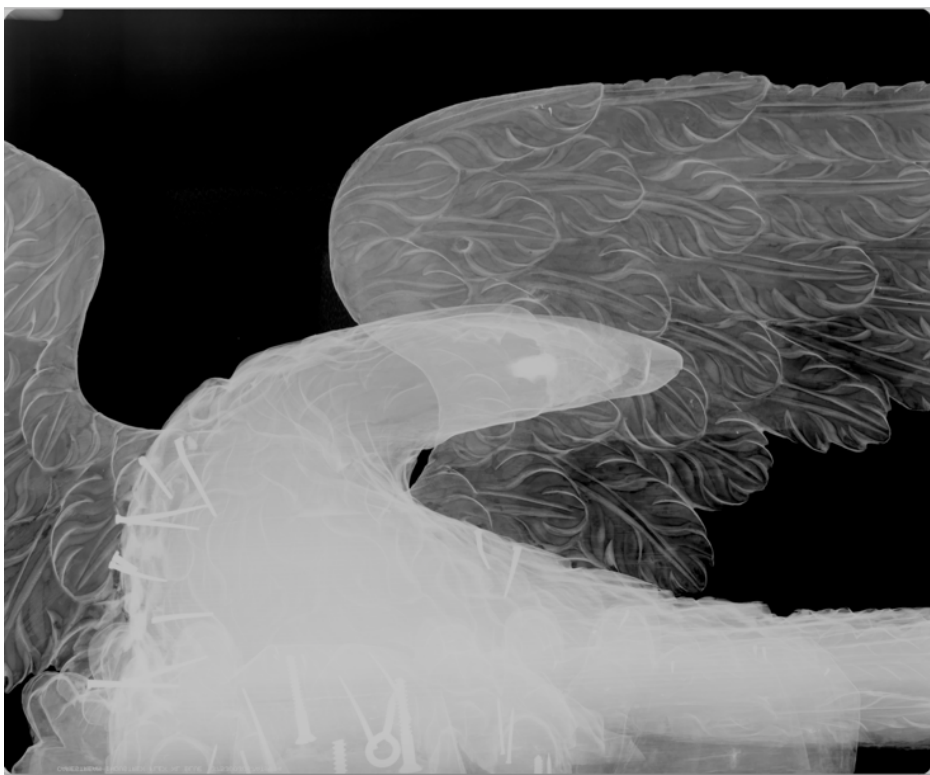


Fig. 65. *Justice* [62]. X-radiograph of the right arm showing a typical Rush join filled with putty and secured with nails driven in at various angles and set below surface. A patch in the arm replaced faulty wood.



From *William Rush, American Sculptor* PAFA, 1982.

The heavily nailed joinery seen on x-rays of the Eliff family eagle are similar to x-rays of firmly attributed Rush sculptures reproduced in PAFA's 1982 publication. Despite these clear similarities, it may be difficult to firmly attribute this sculpture, especially considering that Rush was an extremely influential sculptor with many followers and imitators and that the eagle was a ubiquitous subject in the early nineteenth century.

Condition

Overall fair condition with serious breaks reinforced and stabilized by wooden mending strips. Much of the gilding is darkened and worn with significant losses and is loose and lifting in many areas.

- Shrinkage cracks (or possibly separated glue lines) in main body of eagle; feet and perch fully detached at ankles and apparently held only by later wooden mending strips at back.
- Splits and losses at back of PL wing near joint with main body; a fill material has been applied along this joint and evidence of repair can also be seen at the underside of the wing along joint with main body.

- Unclear whether nails reinforcing wing-to-body joints are original or part of a later restoration; appear to be cut nails—not anachronistic to estimated period of manufacture.
- Dusty and dirty overall, especially at tops of wings.
- Significant loss and wear to surface decoration, especially at tops of wings where large expanses of bare wood are exposed.
- Local areas of loose or lifting gilding, ground layers, and paint decoration throughout.
- Fine crackle on extant matte gilding.
- Some small chips and losses to carving.
- Dark witnesses at back may indicate lost labels or the location of a previous mounting apparatus.
- Localized touch-ups with a metal powder paint (i.e. bronze or brass paint), most notably at feet and perch, along front edges of wings, and on front of backboard (backboard is likely a later addition).
- Burnished gilding on head looks much brighter than the surrounding areas and appears to cover other gilding layer; may be a more recent restoration.

References

- Bantel, Linda, D. Dodge Thompson, Frank H. Goodyear, Jr., William H. Gerdtz, and Virginia Norton Naudé. 1982. *William Rush, American Sculptor*. Philadelphia: Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.
- Cooper, Wendy A. 1993. *Classical Taste in America: 1800-1840*. New York: Abbeville Press.
- James-Gadzinski, Susan and Mary Mullen Cunningham. 1997. *American Sculpture in the Museum of American Art of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Manuels, Marijn and Thayer Tolles. 2005. "William Rush's 'Eagle' for St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Philadelphia." In *Metropolitan Museum Journal*, Vol. 40. 217-233, 22-23. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20320654>.

Images

Before Treatment:



Figure 1. Front, before treatment. (Photo by Jason Wierzbicki)



Figure 2. $\frac{3}{4}$ view from PR, before treatment. (Photo by Jason Wierzbicki)



Figure 3. $\frac{3}{4}$ view from PL, before treatment. (Photo by Jason Wierzbicki)



Figure 4. Underside, before treatment. (Photo by Jason Wierzbicki)



Figure 5. Top, before treatment. (Photo by Jason Wierzbicki)



Figure 6. Back, before treatment. (Photo by Jason Wierzbicki)

Historical Context:

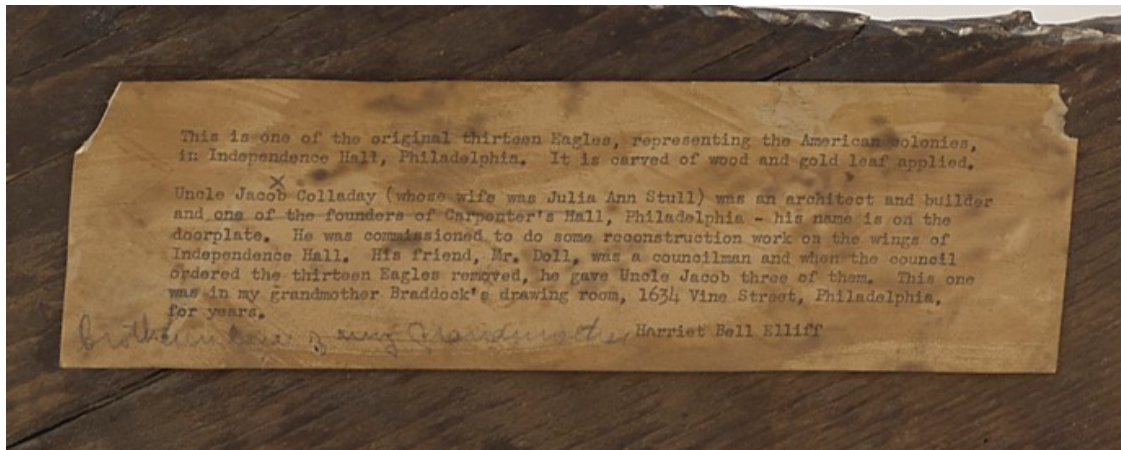


Figure 7. Label affixed to back of Elliff family eagle (175.1992.1). (Photo by Jason Wierzbicki)



Figure 8. *Eagle*, 1809-11. Gilded pine and painted cast iron. Carved by William Rush for St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Philadelphia. Later donated to the city of Philadelphia and displayed at Independence Hall and currently in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Metropolitan Museum of Art 2002.21.1).



Figure 9. *Eagle*, c. 1810. Painted pine. Attributed to William Rush (Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts 1922.12).



Figure 10. Mounted American bald eagle prepared by Charles Willson Peale, 1805. Taxidermy specimen, Independence National Historic Park, Philadelphia (INDE 11 861). (Image: <https://www.phillyhistory.org/photoarchive/Detail.aspx?assetId=16021>)



Figure 11. *Eagle*, c. 1805. Gilded and painted pine. Unidentified artist, formerly attributed to William Rush. Pennsylvania Academy for the Fine Arts (1947.12).



Figure 12. *Triumphal Arch in Honor of Lafayette*, 1824. Watercolor and ink on paper. By Samuel Honeyman Kneass, Philadelphia. Independence National Historic Park Collection, Philadelphia. This watercolor depicts a ceremonial arch built in Philadelphia to honor Lafayette, with carvings by William Rush, including an eagle with outstretched wings looking to one side. (Image: Cooper 1993, 239)

