Sept. 23, 2009

**Trout Gallery to Exhibit Treasured Gift: Portrait of Founder Dr. Benjamin Rush**

Benjamin Rush is coming home.

A rare Thomas Sully portrait of Rush—a signer of the Declaration of Independence and founder of Dickinson College—will be unveiled Friday, Oct. 9, at an exhibit, “A Revolutionary Image,” in The Trout Gallery, Weiss Center for the Arts, on West High Street between West and South College streets. A reception, free and open to the public, will be held from 5 to 7 p.m.

“The residing of this famous portrait at Dickinson magnificently and dramatically confirms the commitment and absolute dedication that Dr. Rush had for what he called ‘our college,’” said Dickinson College President William G. Durden. “He was one of those very few bold people who risked his life by signing the Declaration of Independence and actively engaged a revolution that founded this country.”

The exhibition celebrates The Trout Gallery’s acquisition of Sully’s portrait of a contemplative Rush seated at his desk, reading glasses pushed back on his head as he glances up from a book. A gift of Rush descendant Lockwood Rush and his wife Jackie, The Ruth and Helen Trout Endowment and Friends of The Trout Gallery, the work portrays Rush reflecting on his life and work.

“The painting is important symbolically,” said Phillip Earenfight, executive director of The Trout Gallery and professor of art and art history. “It embodies Rush’s commitment to education and its role in preparing future generations to serve others and the world in which they live.”
Artistically, the painting is a striking portrait by one of America’s most important 19th-century painters.

The portrait is the centerpiece of an exhibition that features artifacts associated with Rush and the founding of Dickinson College. The exhibition also includes a selection of correspondences to and from Rush, as well as his personal annotated bible, books and scientific instruments (include his lancet, which was used to bleed patients), that he gave to the college. The artifacts are from the college’s Archives and Special Collections.

The portrait is a special symbol and source of pride for Durden, who frequently and enthusiastically refers to Rush in speeches and conversations.

“Dr. Rush possesses unassailable values that he later brought to bear on defining the mission of Dickinson College as a new form of university to prepare people distinctively for service and leadership in a democracy — the new form of government that he and his fellow signers intended,” Durden said. “That his portrait is now among us inspires all who are affiliated with Dickinson College — he was too modest to name it after himself — to fulfill through our engagement with the college those noble ambitions of a Signer for our country and the world.”

Rush, near the end of his life, sat for a series of portraits by Sully, a celebrated American painter. In the background of the portrait on exhibit, a curtain is drawn back to reveal a view of the Pennsylvania Hospital (now part of the University of Pennsylvania), where Rush served as a physician.

“Sully’s portrait of Rush is one of the painter’s finest, as it exhibits the bold brushstrokes a painter well versed in the current English trends.” Earenfight said. “Sully, known for his ability
to capture the personality of his subjects, emphasizes Rush’s likeness as well as the doctor’s pursuits in both medicine and intellectual matters.”

Rush, a prominent Philadelphian who died in 1813, was portrayed by leading artists over the course of his life, including Charles Willson Peale, Edward Savage and William Rush. In 1812, Dr. David Hosack wrote to Thomas Sully to commission a painting of Rush. Dr. Hosack requested a painting that contained “the character of Dr. Rush” and also had “a view of your city Hospital [Philadelphia Hospital], to which Dr. Rush’s efforts have been so much and so long devoted.” While it is unclear if Dr. Hosack’s request relates directly to the painting at The Trout Gallery, such features are clearly represented in this work. It is not certain where the painting was originally displayed, but it remained in the Rush family until it was recently acquired by The Trout Gallery.

Rush began his medical career as an apprentice to Dr. John Redman. In 1766, the young Rush left America for a year to study at the prestigious Edinburgh Medical University. Upon his return to Philadelphia, he established his practice as a general physician. Rush also served as physician general to the Continental Army during the Revolutionary War. In addition to treating his patients, the doctor developed a deep interest in mental diseases. At the Pennsylvania Hospital, where he was on staff from 1783 to 1813, Rush worked in the mental ward, examining the symptoms and causes of mental disease. His observations led him to classify mental illness as a bodily disease, not an infliction of the soul. Rush also petitioned for better treatment of the mentally ill who, in his day, were treated more like criminals than sick patients.

Though his efforts, contemporary society has labeled Rush the “Father of American Psychiatry.” In many ways, Rush was a pioneer of medicine; in other areas, however, he remained rooted in
older traditions. Most notably, Rush was a strong proponent of bleeding, a practice based on the belief that disease was caused by an imbalance of bodily fluids and puncturing a vein to remove the “diseased” blood. Even as the treatment’s popularity decreased, Rush remained a strong supporter of the method.

In the 1770s, Rush joined the struggle for separation from England, participating in circles where he actively promoted American independence. He worked closely with many founders, such as John Adams, John Dickinson and Thomas Jefferson. He also worked with Thomas Paine, author of “Common Sense,” an influential work that called for American independence. Rush suggested the title to Paine and found a printer for the controversial text. In 1776, Rush was elected to the Second Continental Congress and signed the Declaration of Independence. Throughout his life, Rush pursued the principles of the American Revolution and advocated other social ideals, such as abolition of slavery and prison reform.

Rush’s desire to serve the newly created United States of America inspired him to create a college that would teach “republican education,” instructing the American youth to become citizens who could support the newly formed of government. Rush advocated the teaching of subjects he deemed useful for the cultivation of individuals, such as government, modern languages, science and history. He also stressed the importance of religion in education, which he believed was a source of virtue that would enable citizens to function responsibly in a democracy. As Rush wrote to John Dickinson, then the governor of Pennsylvania and the man after whom Rush named the college, “May you long live to enjoy the fruits and triumphs of your benevolence in beholding your College – (the vehicle of your name to posterity) – the bulwark of liberty – religion and learning in Pennsylvania.”
Rush chose Carlisle as the site for the college for several reasons. Located in rural central Pennsylvania, an area far away from the eastern universities, Rush intended Dickinson College to teach republican ideals to those far away from the political scene. Rush hoped that this would create a population of unified American citizens. Secondly, the college was formed during the political feuds that followed the American Revolution. Whereas the Constitutionalists resisted intellectualism, believing that even the illiterate farmer could assist in government, the Republicans preferred giving leadership roles to the educated. Dr. Rush, who sided with the Republicans, aimed to spread the party’s ideals through his native Pennsylvania. Working with John Montgomery, a politician from Carlisle, Rush created a charter for the college that was passed in 1783. Until his death, he persistently promoted Dickinson College. Though the college sustained many setbacks during its early years, Rush continued to support the college through his work as an influential trustee. He donated his time to fundraising, aided in the creation of the curriculum and donated numerous books and scientific instruments to increase the educational abilities of Dickinson College.

The exhibit is curated by senior Emma Bennett. The Trout Gallery is open Tuesday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., and is closed Mondays and school holidays.

For more information on the exhibit, call 717-245-1492.

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