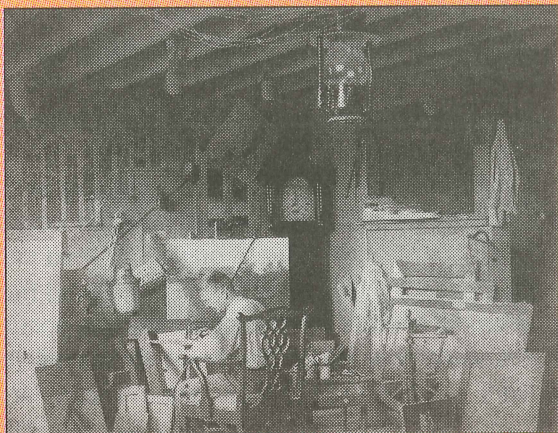


Mystery and Melancholy: The Life & Work of John F. Peto



John F. Peto's working studio circa 1910.

John Frederick Peto was a master of the art of still life painting and, in particular, *trompe l'oeil* – French for “trick the eye” – a style described by the National Gallery of Art as “a heightened form of illusionism” in which objects are rendered “in eye-fooling exactitude.”

He was born in Philadelphia on May 21, 1854 and, though largely self-taught, he spent one year of study at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. His only major exhibit was at the 1881 St. Louis Exposition. He was married in 1887, and the newlyweds came to Island Heights in the 1889, at a time when the shore town was becoming a popular destination for Philadelphians.

During the 18 years he lived there, Peto painted commissioned pieces and played professional cornet at the John Wanamaker Commercial Institute Summer Camp (a camp for the employees of the Wanamaker department store). Peto sold his art to local patrons and business firms, but he never achieved great fame in his lifetime, according to Linda Starzman, Ocean County Cultural & Heritage commissioner and retired Brick Township High School art teacher. In fact, she said, he remained mostly in obscurity until about 1947, when he was “rediscovered” by art critic Alfred Frankenstein. In 1983, the National Gallery of Art held a five-month exhibition titled, “Important Information Inside: The Still Life Paintings of John F. Peto.” (The name refers to a common theme that runs throughout his works.)

Peto was always a known force in the Ocean County area, Starzman said. She first became aware of Peto and his work when she was a high school student, and later introduced her students to him as an important American artist, among the likes of Benjamin West and John Copley.

Characteristic of *trompe l'oeil* is an almost hyper-realistic portrayal of still-life scenes, to such a degree as to startle or deceive the viewer at first glance, even considered in some art circles to be an “abstract” art form, Starzman said. Peto’s “letter rack” and “patch” paintings belong to a subgenre within the *trompe l'oeil* tradition. In those pieces he painted envelopes, photographs and other flat items held in place by adhesive, pins or taut ribbon on a two-dimensional board (or letter rack).

In other pieces his subject matter consists of everyday items, including pipes, candlesticks, newsprint, books and musical instruments. The objects he selected for a painting often were specific to a client’s tastes and lifestyle, she

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added. In many works he included the image of Abraham Lincoln, which hints at a parallel between the President and Peto's own father, whose death came 12 years before Peto's own, in 1907. Another interpretation of Lincoln is as a symbol of American nostalgia for the days before the Civil War divided the country in two.

It is believed that a kind of melancholy settled over Peto later in his life, as it did many post-Civil War Americans, but increasingly so for Peto as his health waned. In his artwork were objects he had chosen deliberately for their worn appearance, as if to emphasize, somewhat fretfully, the passage of time from one era to another, or to suggest that the society of people who once used the items were now gone, Starzman explained. At the same time in history, the advent of photography was taking shape, and the American manufacturing industry was producing goods in mass quantities, so one-of-a-kind handmade items became precious for their uniqueness.

Interestingly, she pointed out, there is little or no evidence of anything feminine in any of his work – e.g., no sewing instruments, cosmetic tools or kitchen utensils.

“Art is a commentary, obviously, on the time period in which it's being produced,” she added.

In obscurity and in debt, Peto died at the age of 53 from a kidney disease called Bright's.

He and his wife had one child, their daughter Helen Peto Smiley, who kept the house and passed it along to her two daughters, one of whom, Joy, ran the Peto House as a bed and breakfast for many years before her death in 2001.

In art history, Peto and his work are often associated with William Harnett, his contemporary and fellow *trompe l'oeil* artist, whom many considered to be the sharper and more stylistic of the two. In comparing the two, Starzman described Peto as the more painterly, his strokes almost visible and his paint application thicker.

The *trompe l'oeil* style originated, however, with Charles Wilson Peale, born more than a century before Peto. Peale was an artist, scientist and inventor who fathered a staggering 17 children, each of them named for a different artist. Four of his children became artists themselves: Titian, Raphaelle, Rubens and Rembrandt. His son Raphaelle would later become known as the “father of American still life.”

Though the term *trompe l'oeil* is French – “the language of the arts,” Starzman said – its practice can be traced back to ancient Greece. Though the earliest examples of *trompe l'oeil* may not jive with the modern notion of photo-realism, Starzman suggested the reason may be that, just as we have evolved socially, politically and in every other way, our vision has also evolved.

In Peto's body of work, Starzman said she reads a kind of loneliness; but also an enigmatic playfulness with the viewer, by way of some of his puzzling “messages,” like the phrase “Important information inside” and mailing addresses on envelopes.

“Once you see his work, once you learn a little bit about his life, you create this bond,” Starzman said.