

# NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

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\*\*PRESS PREVIEW:  
TUESDAY, JANUARY 11, 1983  
10 A.M. to 3 P.M.

FIRST COMPREHENSIVE EXHIBITION OF  
PAINTINGS BY JOHN F. PETO IN THIRTY YEARS  
AT NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

WASHINGTON, D.C. November 15, 1982. Important Information  
Inside: The Still Life Paintings of John F. Peto, an exhibi-  
tion which focuses for the first time exclusively on the  
works of John Frederick Peto, goes on view in the National  
Gallery of Art's East Building January 16 through May 30,  
1983. Peto lived under the shadow of his better known  
colleague and teacher William M. Harnett. This exhibition  
of 60 paintings takes a fresh look at Peto and finds an  
evocative colorist and intriguing still life painter.

The exhibition is made possible in Washington by a  
generous contribution from S. C. Johnson & Son, Inc. It has  
been originated by the National Gallery and will be shared  
with the Amon Carter Museum in Fort Worth, Texas, where the  
exhibition will be on view from July 15 through September  
18, 1983.

Peto convincingly painted flat surfaces to make them  
appear three-dimensional. This illusionistic technique  
which characterizes Peto's works was criticized at the time  
for being so visually deceitful as to border on the immoral.

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While Harnett's style throughout his career was objective and unemotional, Peto's later paintings are subjective and at times autobiographical.

In the tradition of the seventeenth-century Dutch masters, Peto executed tabletop still life compositions of everyday objects: pipes, mugs, newspapers, and books. He also painted inventive combinations of books on shelves, violins against walls or doors, and later, rack paintings, office board pictures, and so-called patch pictures.

Because very few of Peto's paintings were reproduced, the exhibition offers an opportunity to appreciate first hand Peto's expressive use of color, his sense of texture, and his brushwork, all elements forecasting the spirit of modern art. Peto's choice of ordinary objects anticipates the playing cards of Georges Braque's *papiers collés* and in Pablo Picasso's Card Players (1913-1914).

The image of Lincoln appears often in Peto's letter rack paintings from 1890 to 1900. Like the poet Walt Whitman, Peto focuses on Lincoln to symbolize the state of the nation after the Civil War. The panic, confusion, and self doubt of the country along with the unsettling changes brought on by the industrial age are reflected in Peto's somber mood. For Peto, the loss of the nation's leader also symbolized the death of his father, and the Star of David which he often includes next to Lincoln's imagery suggests his concern about mortality, a theme which recurs in his paintings and is dominant in the late nineteenth century.

In Portrait of the Artist's Daughter 1901, Peto portrays

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Helen who was the center of his life. Painted while Peto was seriously ill, the work combines love and pain linking childhood and mortality. Old Violin (c.1890) is another symbol of Victorian sentimentality, the broken strings of the violin reminding us of the erosions of time's passage.

While much of Peto's work seems brooding and somber, some of his later tabletop still lifes show a whimsical side. For example, he painted bananas, peanuts, oranges, and cucumbers as well as candy canes and sweets and peppermints tumbling out of market bags, and in The Cup We All Race 4, (c.1900) there is a playful side as he makes a pun on the word and the number.

Office Board for Smith Bros. Coal Co. (1879), a rack painting of envelopes and advertising cards held in place by crossed tapes, exemplifies Peto's enigmatic nature. The exhibition takes its title from one envelope with the unexplained inscription "Important Information Inside," which appears in this and other rack paintings.

The exhibition is being organized by the Gallery's curator of American Art and senior curator, John Wilmerding. The National Gallery has published Mr. Wilmerding's recently completed monograph, Important Information Inside: The Art of John F. Peto and the Idea of Still Life Painting in Nineteenth-Century America. Harper & Row will distribute the hardcover edition of the book.

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FOR FURTHER INFORMATION or photographs contact Katherine Warwick, Assistant to the Director (Information Officer), or Carolyn Engel Amiot, Information Office, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. 20565, (202) 842-6353.