

Preservation and Restoration of the John Frederick Peto House and Studio

Island Heights, New Jersey



Historic photograph, circa. 1900. The project undertaken in 2006 and 2007 addressed deferred maintenance and necessary repairs to the building's exterior envelope, namely decorative woodworking, shingles, clapboard, trim, windows, and doors, and structure and will restore the building's exterior to the appearance that the artist knew as shown in this image. Note the artist himself in the foreground.

John Frederick Peto: The Artist

John Frederick Peto, 1854-1907. Born in Philadelphia and raised there, Peto enrolled in the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in 1877 and periodically contributed to its annual exhibitions over the next several years. Within two years after his 1887 marriage, Peto settled in the small New Jersey town of Island Heights, where he played the cornet for Methodist camp meetings. He built this combined home and studio, and with his wife brought up their only child Helen.

Peto's early artistic efforts were no doubt influenced, to a certain extent, by the Philadelphia tradition of still-life painting. From the Peale family through John F. Francis, the painters of this city were particularly adept at creating fine tabletop still lifes of commonplace objects, fruit, and foods. These items which Peto chose to include were almost invariably the familiar rather than exotic—books, pipes, mugs, and newspaper, for example. His celebrated Philadelphia contemporary, William M. Harnett, often pursued these same subjects, although he tended to paint in a tighter, more precise manner. Well into the twentieth century, Peto's work was commonly mistaken for Harnett's, and to this day an occasional Peto painting will bear the spurious signature of his friend.

Toward the late 1890s and 1900s Peto's work underwent a gradual change. Already an unusual colorist and exploiter of paint textures, he became increasingly adventurous in composition and more introspective in feeling. Much of his later work was brooding, even somber, and captured the unease of post-Civil War America. In a direct reference to the national sense of crisis, the artist painted his *Reminiscences of 1865* (1897). The image of Lincoln appears in this and several other of the artist's paintings, and it came to represent more than the martyred hero. For Peto, Lincoln took on the identity of a mourned father figure, closely associated with his own father, who dies in 1895.

Autobiographical and other enigmatic clues appear often in Peto's letter-rack and office-board paintings. The business cards, invoices, and other snippets of paper he included in these works recall his father's businesses as a dealer in frames and later in fire department supplies. Their sense of abstraction today strikes a surprisingly modern note. Phrases like *Important Information Inside* are playful references to ideas and facts, ambiguously concealing as much as they divulge. What is revealed throughout Peto's work is a pre-occupation with the process of making art. Also conveyed is his feeling for the sister arts of music and literature, represented in his paintings of violins and varied arrangements of old books.

Peto's concern with dusty volumes and other worn objects takes on a certain poignance in the light of his own sense of mortality. His later years were marred by Bright's disease, a painful kidney condition which caused his death in 1907.



Today, John Frederick Peto is recognized as one of America's most important still-life painters. The mystery and solemnity of his compositions result not only from the rich palettes and the suggestive lighting of these works, but also from the implied histories of the worn and torn objects that are presented. Far left: *Student's Materials*, c. 1890–1900, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Left: *The Old Violin* National Gallery of Art, Washington DC.

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Historical Significance of the House and Studio

The John Frederick Peto House and Studio is a pivotal (contributing) resource within the Island Heights Historic District, a New Jersey State and National Register Historic District placed on the National Register in 1981. The National Register nomination states: *now a museum dedicated to the renowned American still-life artist John Frederick Peto (who also designed much, if not all, of the house), the building is a Queen Anne structure on an irregular plan. It was built in 1890, and is 2-1/2 stories high.*

The John Frederick Peto House and Studio possesses historical and architectural significance of great value to the Borough of Island Heights. It is a monument to the life and work of renowned still-life painter John Frederick Peto, often called the American Rembrandt. Peto designed the house and studio; at the start of this project they still contains some of his furniture and the artifacts which he depicted in his paintings. Although previously identified as being designed in the Queen Anne style, the architecture is more characteristic of the geometric and simpler Shingle Style. Although the house had been altered, it still conveys the feeling of a late nineteenth century rustic Victorian house. It is unique as an example of an artist's home and studio, as designed by the artist, and is evocative of his art and his personality. The property is also one of only a handful of historic house museums that celebrate the life of a famous American artist. It has remained in, and been cared for, by the Peto Family for 115 years.



Late 2005, left. The building was transformed and remodeled over time. Rooflines were altered, first and second floor rooms were extended west towards Cedar Avenue (since removed), original clapboards were covered by aluminum siding, and an oil tank was exposed to street view.

Mid 2006, below. Exterior restoration work begins by replacing non-original asphalt shingles with new cedar shingles. A later two-story addition nearest Cedar Avenue was demolished to re-establish the image of the house that Peto knew.





Early 2007. Exterior restoration nearing completion. Note the removal of the large dormer over the studio and the two-story west extension towards Cedar Avenue, restored shutters and shell pediment. Restored exterior details were based on physical examples (building archeology), historic photographs (documentary evidence), and paint microscopy (materials analysis).



Detail view of reconstructed stone & shell pediment.

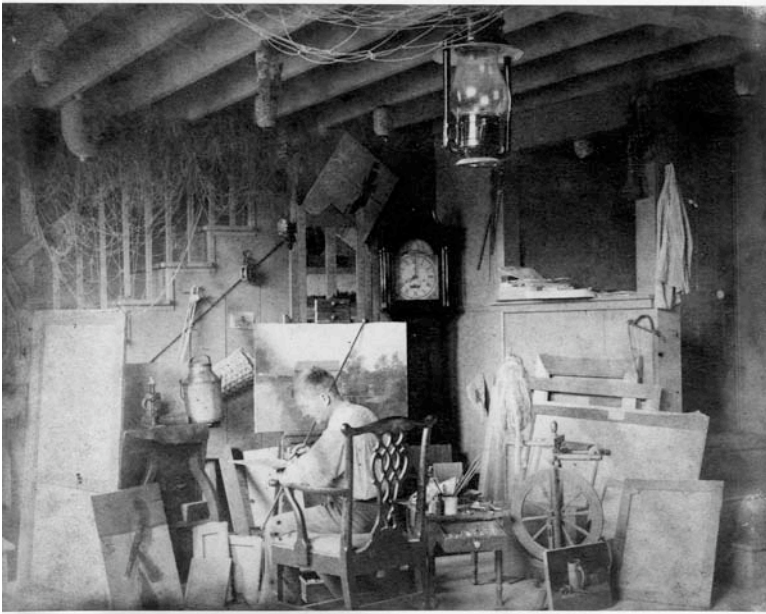


Building Archeology: Exemplified here by an original portion of the roof left untouched by a later addition, allowed the interpretation of the original exterior design.

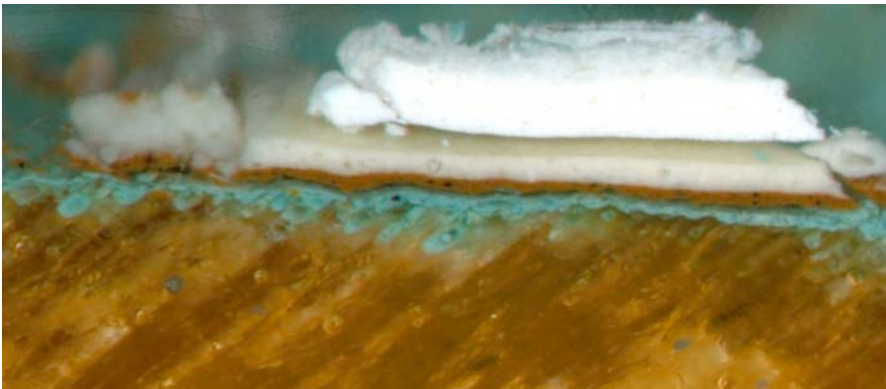


Documentary Evidence: Historic family photographs from the early 1900s of J. F. Peto, his wife, and only daughter Helen provided important evidence for authentic replication of lost features, especially as they relate to the reconstruction of the original porch and other exterior features.





Peto's Studio, then and now. The setting that Peto created and knew, as well as many of the artifacts of his time, survives. These items are being stored-off site until construction is completed.



Materials analysis: Determination of the appropriate historic color scheme of building elements, both interior and exterior, is made possible through paint analysis under a microscope. Here a small sample from the ceiling of the studio reveals the original blue-green color of the studio woodworking. From bottom of photo to top: wood substrate; blue-green as the original color; with clay-re; cream; and white as subsequent paint layers.

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