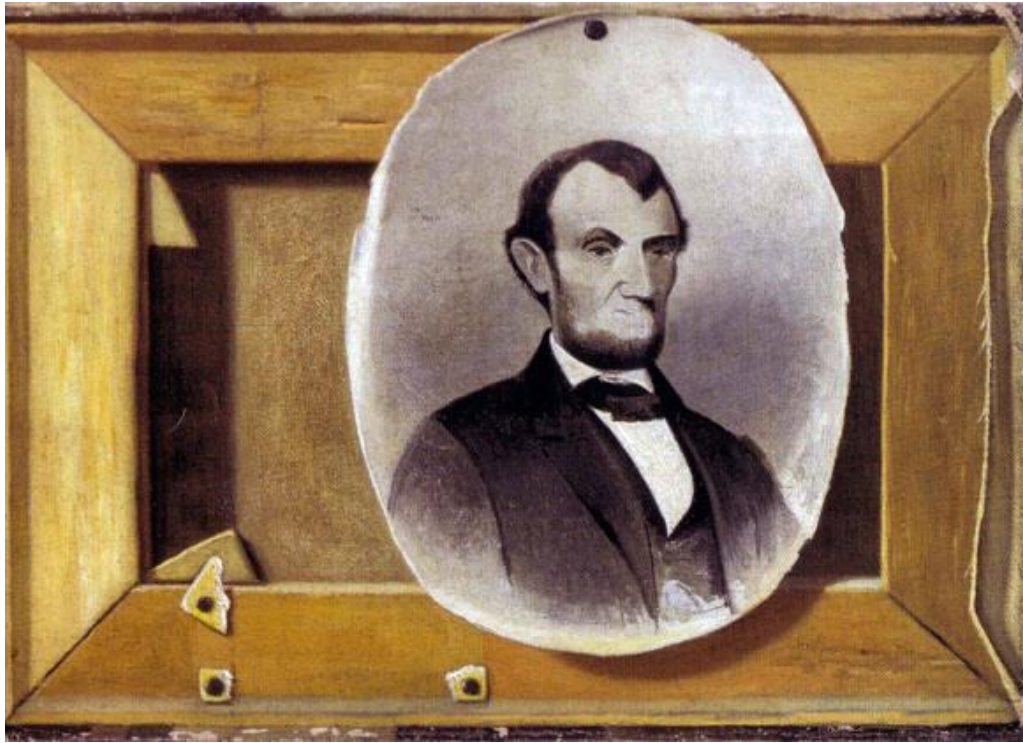


Basic Detail Report



Title: Lincoln and the Pflieger Stretcher

Date: 1898

Primary Maker: com.gallerysystems.emuseum.core.entities.RecordXPerson@28e1a

Medium: Oil on canvas

Description: Peto's subject matter can be divided into four basic categories: small kitchen still lifes, often arrangements of a few basic objects, such as pipes, mugs, jugs, dry biscuits, and bottles; library still lifes; arrangements of objects hanging on sections of walls or door panels; and office boards and rack pictures. The trompe-l'oeil device of an imaginary canvas back is less common. (1) Yet the engraved portrait of Abraham Lincoln is found in numerous late rack pictures by Peto. "Lincoln and the Pflieger Stretcher" is one of seven known Petos that bear the inscription "An Old Mill" on the back. (2) One or two of these works do have pictures of an old mill on the back, reflecting Peto's common practice of reusing canvases. (3) According to Frankenstein, Peto was often short of cash and sold countless small works such as these "for whatever they would bring", about three or four dollars each. (4) The New Britain canvas was apparently among a stack of paintings Peto sold to his neighbor, James Bryant. (5) The main subject of "Lincoln and the Pflieger Stretcher", the canvas back, can be found in paintings by the seventeenth-century artist Cornelis Gysbrechts. It is not clear if Peto saw these earlier examples or if he

Basic Detail Report

invented the subject independently. (6) Like Gysbrechts, Peto's painted stretcher is realistically depicted from the surface textures of the wood and the curled edges of the canvas, to the remnants of a label, held by three tacks, and the shadow cast by the stretcher bar and the oval portrait. Peto used the Pflieger stretcher, patented in 1886, throughout his career; its distinctive beveled and beaded edges form a factor in distinguishing Petos from Harnetts. (7) The successful illusionism of the stretcher is countered by the poorly executed Lincoln portrait. Peto copied the image from a popular J. C. Buttre engraving after a well-known Matthew Brady photograph but left it only a few brushstrokes from completion around the mouth. This unfinished aspect gives the portrait the tattered and worn quality of an old engraving. The presence of the Lincoln portrait also adds a narrative, anecdotal dimension to the painting. While Peto's trompe-l'oeil rack pictures incorporated photographs and memorabilia relating to the owners, works with the Lincoln image evoke a sense of haunting melancholy. Peto's obsession with the Lincoln image may have been related to the death of his own father, a Civil War veteran who died about 1895. (8) Yet in his almost obsessive use of the Lincoln image after 1894, Peto also may have been expressing the general fin-de-siècle malaise shared by many Americans. The tragedy of Lincoln's assassination and the nation's shattered self-confidence in the wake of the Civil War were common themes in turn-of-the-century prose by Walt Whitman and Stephen Crane, still lifes by Nicholas A. Brooks, George Cope, and Alexander Pope, and countless statues and monuments erected across the country in memory of the dead. (9) MAS Bibliography: Alfred Frankenstein, John F. Peto, exhib. cat. (Brooklyn: Brooklyn Museum and Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences, 1950); Alfred Frankenstein, "After the Hunt: William Harnett and Other American Still Life Painters, 1870-1900", (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1953: rev. ed. 1969), pp. 99-111; Alfred Frankenstein, "The Reality of Appearance: The Trompe l'Oeil Tradition in American Painting", exhib. cat. (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1970); John Wilmerding, "Important Information Inside: The Art of John F. Peto and the Idea of Still-Life Painting in Nineteenth-Century America", exhib. cat. (New York: Harper and Row, 1983). NOTES: 1. In his notes on Peto, Frankenstein mentions only a few examples of the canvas-back subject. One is almost identical to the New Britain work, except for a few minor changes: the image of Lincoln appears on a rectangular card rather than as a painted oval portrait and the Pflieger stretcher has a slightly different torn label, now held by two tacks rather than three, and turned-over canvas edges. This work is signed "J. F. Peto" at the lower right (see Alfred Victor Frankenstein Papers, 1861-1980, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., reel 1377, frame 377). 2. Frankenstein, "After the Hunt", p. 106. 3. Ibid. 4. Frankenstein, "John F. Peto", p. 24. 5. The paintings sold to Bryant were passed down through his son-in-law Howard Keyser Jr. and to his children Howard, Cheston, and James, and to Mrs. William Wood (Frankenstein, "After the Hunt", p. 106). 6. Frankenstein, "The Reality of Appearance", p. 54. 7. Ibid., 100. 8. Wilmerding gives 1895 as the year of Thomas

Basic Detail Report

Hope Peto's death, but the artist's 1904 memento mori for his father gives the date 1896; reproduced in Wilmerding, "Important Information", p. 14. 9. Ibid., pp. 194-204; and Robert F. Chirico, "Language and Imagery in Late Nineteenth-Century Trompe l'Oeil," "Arts Magazine" 59 (March 1985): 110-14.

Dimensions: 10 x 14 x 7/8 in. (25.4 x 35.6 x 2.2 cm) Frame Dimension: 17 5/8 x 21 1/2 x 2 3/4 in. (44.8 x 54.6 x 7 cm)