



# Smithsonian

## *Archives of American Art*

### A Finding Aid to the John Frederick Peto and Peto Family Papers, circa 1850-1983, in the Archives of American Art

Erin Corley

Funding for the processing and digitization of this collection  
was provided by the Terra Foundation for American Art.

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Archives of American Art  
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## Collection Overview

<b>Repository:</b>	Archives of American Art
<b>Title:</b>	John Frederick Peto and Peto family papers
<b>Date:</b>	1850-1983
<b>Identifier:</b>	AAA.petojohn
<b>Creator:</b>	Peto, John Frederick, 1854-1907
<b>Extent:</b>	2.1 Linear feet
<b>Language:</b>	English .
<b>Summary:</b>	The papers of still life artist John Frederick Peto and his family date from circa 1850 to 1983 and measure 2.1 linear feet. Within the papers are scattered biographical materials, a few letters to and from Peto, and his daughter Helen Peto Smiley's correspondence with galleries, scholars, and others concerning Peto's artwork. Also found are news clippings, exhibition catalogs, and other printed material, photographs and glass plate negatives of Peto, his family, and his artwork, and one small oil sketch fragment. Much of the collection documents the mid-twentieth century renewed interest in Peto's artwork.

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## Administrative Information

### Provenance

The collection was donated in 2004 by Gregory Bejarano, John Frederick Peto's great-grandson.

### Alternative Forms Available

The papers of **John Frederick Peto** and the Peto family in the Archives of American Art were digitized in 2006, and total 665 images.

### Processing Information

The collection was fully processed by Erin Corley in 2007 and digitized in 2007 with funding provided by the Terra Foundation for American Art.

### Preferred Citation

John Frederick Peto and Peto family papers, circa 1850-1983. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

### Restrictions on Access

The collection has been digitized and is available online via AAA's website. Glass plate negatives are housed separately and not served to researchers.

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## Biographical Note

John Frederick Peto (1854-1907) was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, to Thomas Hope Peto and Catherine Peto. He was raised by his mother's family, the Hamms, and lived with them until his marriage. Little is known about his early life; he was listed as a painter in the Philadelphia City Directory in 1876 and was enrolled in the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in 1878. During this time he also became friends with fellow artist William Harnett and was greatly influenced by Harnett's trompe l'oeil still life paintings. During the 1880s Peto maintained a studio and exhibited several works at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts annual exhibition. Like Harnett, he painted trompe l'oeil still life paintings, most notably, rack-looking structures or shelves that depicted a variety of items, many of them autobiographical. Peto also lived briefly in Cincinnati, Ohio, where he met Christine Pearl Smith, and they were married in 1889. He received very little recognition for his paintings in Philadelphia, and in 1889 he and his wife moved to Island Heights, New Jersey so that he could make money playing the cornet at religious revivals held there. In 1893 they had a daughter Helen. Though he lost interest in the professional art world and fell into obscurity, Peto continued painting and sold many works to the local drug store and business people, until his death in 1907.

Recognition of Peto's contribution to the trompe l'oeil genre didn't occur until over forty years after his death. During research on the paintings of William Harnett, art critic Alfred Frankenstein discovered that numerous paintings thought to be painted by Harnett had forged signatures and were actually painted by Peto. Frankenstein published an article in the *Art Bulletin* in 1949 about his discoveries that renewed interest in the work of Peto and the trompe l'oeil genre.

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## Scope and Content Note

The papers of still life artist John Frederick Peto and his family date from circa 1850 to 1983 and measure 2.1 linear feet. Within the papers are scattered biographical materials, including his marriage certificate, a memorial poem written by Samuel Callan, Helen Peto Smiley's notes about her father's artwork, and other brief writings about Peto and trompe-l'oeil painting. Correspondence includes a few letters to and from Peto, his daughter Helen Peto Smiley's correspondence with galleries, scholars, such as art critic Alfred Frankenstein, and others concerning Peto's artwork, and miscellaneous correspondence. Printed material consists of news clippings about Peto, his family, and fellow artist William Harnett, exhibition catalogs, reproductions of artwork, and other items. Photographs and glass plate negatives depict Peto in his studio, with family, and with Harnett, as well as his family, his home and studio in Island Heights, New Jersey, and his artwork. Also found is one small fragment of an oil sketch, unsigned and undated.

Much of the collection, including Helen Peto's notes and correspondence, the printed material, and photographs of artwork document the mid-twentieth century renewed interest in Peto's artwork.

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## Arrangement

The collection is arranged into 5 series:

Missing Title:

- Series 1: Biographical Material, circa 1870s-1983 (Box 1, OV 5; 9 folders)
- Series 2: Correspondence, 1862-1983 (Box 1; 4 folders)
- Series 3: Printed Material, 1880-1983 (Box 1, OV 5; 11 folders)
- Series 4: Photographs, circa 1850-1980 (Box 2-7, OV 5; 1.3 linear feet)

- Series 5: Artwork, circa late 1800s (Box 4; 1 folder)

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## Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

### Subjects:

Painters -- New Jersey  
Trompe l'oeil painting

### Types of Materials:

Photographs

### Names:

Frankenstein, Alfred Victor, 1906-  
Harnett, William Michael, 1848-1892  
Smiley, Helen Peto

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## Container Listing

### Series 1: Biographical Material, circa 1870s-1983

(Box 1, OV 5; 9 folders)

**Scope and Contents:** This series contains biographical material documenting John Frederick Peto's life and career as an artist. Included are the certificate for his marriage to Christine Pearl Smith, two of his business cards, and written agreements with his daughter Helen giving her a clock and his cornet. Also found are items about his death in 1907, including his obituary, a lock of his hair "taken as he lay in his casket in his studio," and a memorial poem written by Samuel Callan. Helen Peto Smiley's notes on her father's artwork includes lists of artwork and prices, and miscellaneous items. Other writings include a brief essay on trompe-l'oeil painting in the United States, draft exhibition captions for Peto's artwork, and a brief biography of Peto written for an exhibition. Also found are a few items belonging to John Frederick Peto's father, Thomas Hope Peto, including business cards, and a ticket to the Centennial Exhibition in 1876 which includes his photograph.

**Arrangement:** Items are arranged in chronological order.

Box 1, Folder 1	<a href="#">Thomas H. Peto Items, circa 1870s, 1900s</a>
Box 1, Folder 2	<a href="#">Marriage Certificate, 1889</a> (See OV 5)
Box 1, Folder 3	<a href="#">John Frederick Peto Business Cards, circa late 1800s</a>
Box 1, Folder 4	<a href="#">John Frederick Peto Gift Agreements with Helen Peto, 1902, 1906</a>
Box 1, Folder 5	<a href="#">John Frederick Peto Obituary, 1907</a>
Box 1, Folder 6	<a href="#">Lock of John Frederick Peto's Hair, 1907</a>
Box 1, Folder 7	<a href="#">"In Memoriam" by Samuel Callan, 1907</a> (See OV 5)
Box 1, Folder 8	<a href="#">Notes on John Frederick Peto's Artwork by Helen Peto Smiley, circa 1949-1963</a>
Box 1, Folder 9	<a href="#">Writings about John Frederick Peto and Trompe-l'oeil Painting, 1963, 1968, 1983</a>
Box OV 5	<a href="#">Oversize Marriage Certificate, 1889</a> (See also Box 1, F2)
Box OV 5	<a href="#">Oversize "In Memoriam" by Samuel Callan, 1907</a> (See also Box 1, F7)

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## Series 2: Correspondence, 1862-1983

(Box 1; 4 folders)

**Scope and Contents:** This series contains scattered the correspondence of John Frederick Peto and other family members. Found here are a brief letter and a postcard to Peto from his father, Thomas H. Peto, a letter congratulating Peto on reaching manhood signed by "Not a man", and three postcards sent by Peto to his daughter, Helen. Helen Peto Smiley's correspondence primarily consists of letters regarding the exhibition, sale, or reproduction of her father's artwork but also includes a letter from her grandmother and postcard from her mother. Also found in Helen's correspondence are letters to and from art critic Alfred V. Frankenstein who, in 1949, published an article about Peto's artwork that created new interest in the exhibition and purchase of his paintings. Miscellaneous correspondence includes two envelopes and a postcard addressed to Peto's wife, Christine, a copy of a letter from Alfred Frankenstein to the New York Graphic Society, and several letters to and from Helen's daughter, Joy Smiley Bejarano.

**Arrangement:** Correspondence is arranged chronologically within each folder.

Box 1, Folder 10	<a href="#">John Frederick Peto Correspondence, 1862-1907</a>
Box 1, Folder 11	<a href="#">Helen Peto Smiley Correspondence, 1900, 1910, 1948-1953</a>
Box 1, Folder 12	<a href="#">Helen Peto Smiley Correspondence, 1953-1978</a>
Box 1, Folder 13	<a href="#">Miscellaneous Correspondence, 1900-1912, 1948-1983</a>

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## Series 3: Printed Material, 1880-1983

(Box 1, OV 5; 11 folders)

**Scope and Contents:** Printed material consists primarily of exhibition catalogs and clippings about John Frederick Peto's career and artwork. Found here are three exhibition catalogs, including one for a exhibition of Peto's artwork at the Brooklyn Museum in 1950 which contains a critical biography by art critic Alfred Frankenstein. The 1949 article Frankenstein wrote about his discoveries of Harnett painting forgeries that were actually by Peto is included in the news clippings. Also found are news clippings about Peto, his family, and the exhibition of his artwork, two articles about Peto in the *Kennedy Quarterly*, and news clippings and other material about fellow still life artist William Harnett. Additional printed material documents Island Heights, New Jersey, where Peto lived, and the printing of a Peto stamp in 1974. Miscellaneous printed material includes announcements, brochures, and other items.

**Arrangement:** Items are arranged chronologically within each folder.

Box 1, Folder 14	<a href="#">Exhibition Catalogs, 1950</a>
Box 1, Folder 15	<a href="#">Exhibition Catalogs, 1965, 1971</a>
Box 1, Folder 16	<a href="#">News Clippings, John Frederick Peto, 1880-1918</a>
Box 1, Folder 17	<a href="#">News Clippings, John Frederick Peto, 1949-1983</a>
Box 1, Folder 18	<a href="#">News Clippings, William Harnett, circa 1892-1971</a>
Box 1, Folder 19	<a href="#">Printed Material about William Harnett, 1892, 1948-1971</a> (See also OV 5)
Box 1, Folder 20	<a href="#">Printed Material about Island Heights, New Jersey, circa 1900, 1932-1981</a>
Box 1, Folder 21	<a href="#">Printed Material about Peto Stamp, 1974</a>
Box 1, Folder 22	<a href="#">The Kennedy Quarterly, 1964, 1965</a>
Box 1, Folder 23	Notecards showing Peto's Artwork (Blank), 1978, 1983
Box 1, Folder 24	Miscellaneous Printed Material, 1967-1978
Box OV 5	Printed Material about William Harnett, 1892, 1948-1971 (See also Box 1, Folder 19)

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## Series 4: Photographs, circa 1850-1980

(Box 2-7, OV 5; 1.3 linear feet)

**Scope and Contents:** This series contains photographs and glass plate negatives of Peto, his family, his home and studio, and his artwork. Photographs of Peto include several portraits, Peto in his studio at Island Heights, New Jersey, with fellow artist William Harnett, and with family members. Additional photographs are of his wife Christine, his daughter Helen as a baby and young girl, and several other family members of the Peto family in Philadelphia, and of Christine's family, the Smiths, in Lerado, Ohio. Also found are photographs of the interior and exterior of Peto's home and studio in Island Heights, props he used for his paintings, photographs of Abraham Lincoln also used for his artwork, and miscellaneous photographs, some of which may have been taken by Peto. Also contained here are several photographs of Peto's artwork. Of the numerous glass plate negatives in this collection, some are also found among the photographs mentioned above, others have not been printed, but have been digitized and are available online.

Glass plate negatives are housed separately and closed to researchers, though all have been digitized to provide access.

Box 2, Folder 1	<a href="#">Photographs of John Frederick Peto, circa 1857-1900</a>
Box 2, Folder 2	<a href="#">Photographs of John Frederick Peto, circa 1857-1900</a>
Box 2, Folder 3	<a href="#">Photographs of John Frederick Peto in His Studio, circa 1880s-1898</a>
Box 2, Folder 4	<a href="#">Photograph of John Frederick Peto and William Harnett, circa 1885 (See OV 5)</a>
Box 2, Folder 5	<a href="#">Photographs of John Frederick Peto with Family Members, circa 1860-1907</a>
Box 2, Folder 6	<a href="#">Photographs of Christine Peto, 1889, 1890s</a>
Box 2, Folder 7	<a href="#">Photographs of Helen Peto, 1893-1905, circa 1970</a>
Box 2, Folder 8	<a href="#">Photographs of Peto and Smith Family Members, circa 1850-1920s</a>
Box 2, Folder 9	<a href="#">Photographs of Peto and Smith Family Members, circa 1850-1920s</a>
Box 2, Folder 10	<a href="#">Interior Photographs of Home and Studio, circa 1918</a>
Box 2, Folder 11	<a href="#">Exterior Photographs of Home and Studio, 1889-1947</a>
Box 2, Folder 12	<a href="#">Unidentified Photographs of People, circa 1870s</a>
Box 2, Folder 13	<a href="#">Photographs of an Exhibition, Palace of the Legion of Honor, San Francisco, circa 1949</a>
Box 2, Folder 14	<a href="#">Photographs of Props, circa early 1900s</a>
Box 2, Folder 15	<a href="#">Photographs of Abraham Lincoln, circa late 1800s</a>

Box 2, Folder 16	<a href="#">Miscellaneous Photographs, circa 1870s-1880s</a>
Box 2, Folder 17	Photographs of Artwork by Peto, circa 1900-1980
Box 3, Folder 1	Photographs of Artwork by Peto, circa 1900-1980
Box 3, Folder 2	Photograph of Artwork by William Harnett, circa 1890
Box 3, Folder 3	Photographs of Artwork, Negatives, circa 1940s
Glass Plate Negatives	
Box 3, Folder 4-5	John Frederick Peto, circa 1880s-1890s (2 folders) <a href="#">Image(s)</a> <a href="#">Image(s)</a> Notes: 4 glass plate negatives housed in boxes 6 & 7
Box 3, Folder 6	<a href="#">John Frederick Peto and William Harnett, circa 1885</a> Notes: 1 glass plate negative housed in box 6
Box 3, Folder 7	<a href="#">John Frederick Peto with Family Members, circa 1857, 1889</a> Notes: 2 glass plate negatives housed in boxes 6 & 7
Box 3, Folder 8-11	Helen Peto, circa 1893-1900 (4 folders) <a href="#">Image(s)</a> <a href="#">Image(s)</a> <a href="#">Image(s)</a> <a href="#">Image(s)</a> Notes: 9 glass plate negatives housed in boxes 6 & 7
Box 3, Folder 12-14	Peto and Smith Family Members, circa 1850-1900 (3 folders) <a href="#">Image(s)</a> <a href="#">Image(s)</a> <a href="#">Image(s)</a> Notes: 9 glass plate negatives housed in box 7
Box 4, Folder 1-6	Peto and Smith Family Members, circa 1850-1900 (6 folders) <a href="#">Image(s)</a> <a href="#">Image(s)</a> <a href="#">Image(s)</a> <a href="#">Image(s)</a> <a href="#">Image(s)</a> <a href="#">Image(s)</a> Notes: 18 glass plate negatives housed in boxes 6 & 7
Box 4, Folder 7	<a href="#">Smith Family Farm, circa 1880s</a>

	Notes:	2 glass plate negatives housed in box 7
Box 4, Folder 8	<a href="#">Interior of Home, circa early 1900s</a>	
	Notes:	3 glass plate negatives housed in box 7
Box 4, Folder 9	<a href="#">Artwork, circa 1890s</a>	
	Notes:	1 glass plate negative housed in box 7
Box 6	Glass Plate Negatives	
	Notes:	46 glass plate negatives; scanned with boxes 3 & 4
Box 7	Glass Plate Negatives	
	Notes:	46 glass plate negatives; scanned with boxes 3 & 4
Box OV 5	Oversize Photograph of John Frederick Peto and William Harnett, circa 1885 (See also Box 2, F4)	

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## Series 5: Artwork, circa late 1800s

*(Box 4; 1 folder)*

Scope and Contents: Found here is one small fragment of an oil sketch on paper of a landscape. This item is unsigned and undated, but may have been painted by John Frederick Peto.

Box 4, Folder 10      [Oil Sketch Fragment, circa late 1800s](#)

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