

Still Lifes

Still-Life:

A picture of lifeless objects. Common subjects for a still-life might include books, clothing, flowers, food or vessels.



John Frederick Peto (1854-1907)

Still-Life with a Whale Oil Lamp, ca. 1899
Oil on canvas

About the Artist:

The still-life painter John Frederick Peto was born in 1854 in Philadelphia. In 1878 he enrolled at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, where he exhibited between 1879 and 1888. There he met and befriended William Michael Harnett, whose trompe l'oeil ("fool the eye") still lifes exerted a decisive influence on his career. Peto opened a studio in 1880 and earned a meager living by painting rack pictures for Philadelphia's aesthetically unsophisticated business and professional men. He was reputed to have made photographic and painted portraits to support himself. An able cornetist, he began to perform for the Methodist Island Heights Camp Meeting Association in New Jersey, where he built a house in 1889. Peto painted in semi-seclusion and obscurity there for the remainder of his life. He died in Island Heights in 1907. Peto was almost completely forgotten until 1949, when he was "discovered" by art historians who were interested in and researching American still life painting.

About the Art:

Peto's paintings tend to be anecdotal and sentimental in his choice of discarded and randomly placed objects. He painted a wide variety of still-life subjects, comprising of letter racks holding printed matter, shelves of books, tabletops and doors with hanging musical instruments. He may have intended this composition to suggest a theme of *vanitas*, which reminds us of life's fleeting qualities; it incorporates burnt-out matches, a dark lamp and damaged, discarded books.



Discussion Questions:

- What **primary colors** do you see? Do you see any **secondary colors**? **Warm colors**? **Cool colors**?
- Are there any **geometric shapes** in this work? Are there **organic shapes**?
- How does the artist use **visual texture** in this work?
- What do you think is happening in this painting? Pretend the painting is a scene frozen from a movie. Describe what happened right before this moment. What will happen next?

Lee Krasner (1908-1984)

Still-Life, 1939
Oil on canvas



About the Artist:

Born in Brooklyn, New York in 1908, Lenore Krasner was raised by a matriarchal Russian Jewish family. She decided at an early age that she would become an artist. While working as a mural painter for the WPA she became very involved with radical forms of art and politics.

A leader of the first original American art movement, [Abstract Expressionism](#), Lee Krasner had experimented with many styles when she finally found comfort with the challenging nature of abstract expressionism. The movement emerged with artists in the mid 1940s aspiring to share their feelings through their painting. Customarily these artists were not concerned with representing a subject, but rather believed that their own creativity or expressive method of painting was as important as the painting.

During the early part of the 1940s Krasner began working with artist Jackson Pollock, whom she later married. Pollock relied on her emotional support a great deal. A consequence of this was that her work was often set aside and overshadowed by his accomplishments. She, however, outlived him by more than 30 years. In that time she became known, in her own right, as a key figure in American art of the twentieth century.

Discussion Questions:

- Do you see horizontal [lines](#) in this painting? Diagonal? Vertical? How did the artist use these lines? What things do you think are in the still life?
- Do you see [organic shapes](#)? [Geometric shapes](#)? What objects do you think the artist wanted those shapes to represent in the still life?
- What [colors](#) do you see? Where do you see each color? Can you imagine what this painting would look like in black and white? How would the feeling change?

About the Art:

Still-Life, 1939, was completed before Krasner's style turned to complete abstraction. Some of her strongest early paintings focus on the still life and her use of its subject matter to progress towards abstraction. The artist experimented with the still life on at least 14 canvases, most of which are untitled and date from 1940 to 1943. Here Krasner reduced the still life elements to barely recognizable forms. She placed geometric elements within a tilted perspective and defined them by emphasizing them with outlines. It has been thought that Krasner's husband and artist Jackson Pollock signed her name to this work, as in photographs of the 1950s show the painting without a number or signature. Pollock knew the importance of signing a work and the combination of script with printed letters, as well of the use of the artist's full name, indicate Pollock signed the work.

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COMPARISON QUESTIONS

1. If designing or planning your own still life, what might you include?
2. Compare the two paintings: Are the colors the same or different? Where do you see different colors? What type of mood do the colors create in each painting?
3. Which painting are you most intrigued by? Why?
4. Which painting would you classify as being **abstract**? Which one do you feel is realistic? Why? Describe some of the qualities of an abstract and realistic painting or work of art.

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

VISUAL ARTS

Multiple Views

Materials:

Items for still-life (may include flowers, fruit or dishes), drawing paper and utensils.

Goals/Objectives:

This activity will provide students with experience drawing objects focusing on texture, shape and color. Students will create an original work of art from different angles.

Procedure:

Set up a still life in the classroom. Ask students to draw in 15 minute intervals from the still life. After each 15 minute session, students should move to another location where the still life can be seen and continue drawing. Advanced students might be asked to include descriptive, directional and expressive lines in their drawings. Encourage students to emphasize aspects of objects closest to them by giving attention to its shape, color and texture.

VISUAL ARTS

Piece by Piece

Lee Krasner often cut up older works of art she had done and made them into collages. Set up another still life.

Materials:

Items for a still life, colored paper, newspaper and magazines, markers, crayons, glue, pencils and paper.

Goals/Objectives:

Students will create an original work of art of mixed media.

Procedure:

1. Discuss collage art and the types of materials an artist might use in creating a collage. Ask students to create their own version of the still life in a collage form. Encourage students to walk around the room to find an angle they would like to recreate in their collage.
2. Display the finished collages around the room. Discuss how the collages are similar and different and how each individual interpretation of the same still life is unique.

