

ART



Raphaelle Peale, "Orange and Book," c. 1817, oil on canvas, epitomizes early still-life works.



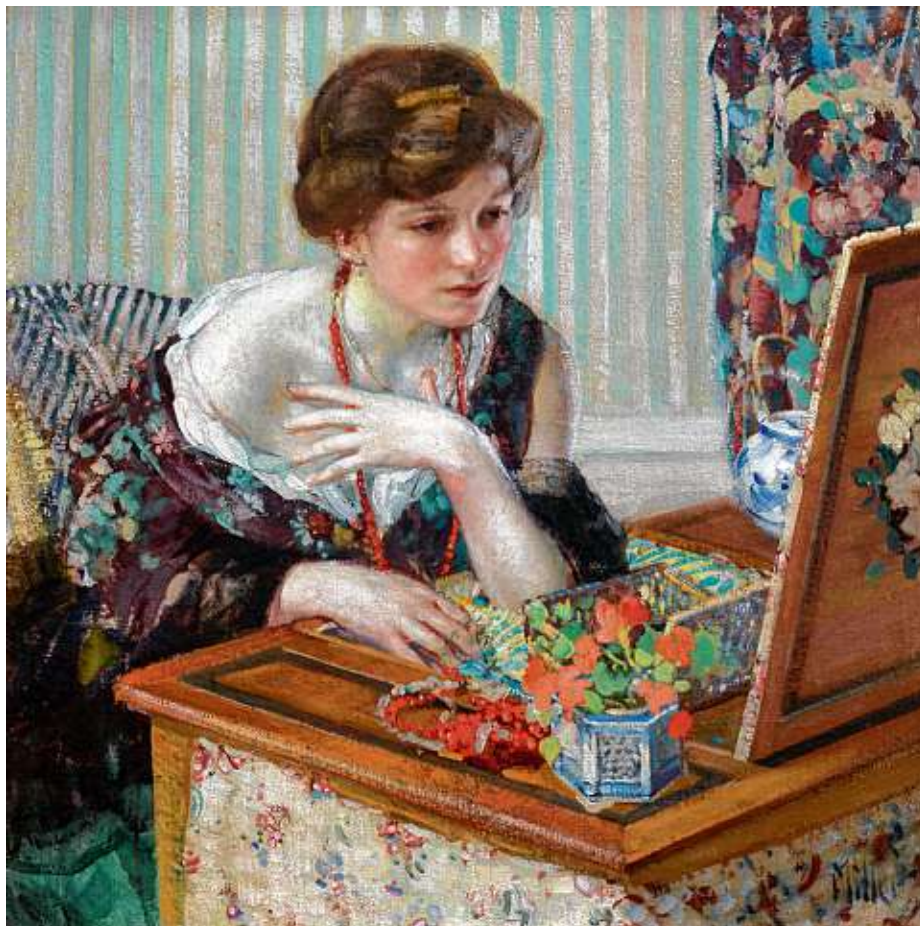
Andrew Wyeth's "Christina's Teapot," from 1968, memorializes a well-known figure of American art.

The American still-life

MFAH exhibition reveals collectors' broad approach to the tabletop genre



John Frederick Peto's "The Writer's Table: A Precarious Moment," from 1892, is a masterpiece of American art.



Richard Edward Miller's "The Scarlet Necklace," from 1914, has still-life elements, including the vase of flowers. The Frank and Michelle Hevrdejs Collection photos

By Molly Glentzer

Say "still-life," and many people quickly visualize opulent paintings by Dutch Old Masters — 17th-century table-tops brimming with the symbolism of opulent flowers in various stages of decay, insects and lusciously split-open fruit.

Such pictures didn't find a voice on this side of the Atlantic until after the American Revolution. Before the early 19th century, Americans who wanted to own paintings commissioned portraits.

Raphaelle Peale, one of the first American still-life masters, showed miniatures at the Pennsylvania Academy for the Fine Arts in 1811, but such works were not particularly profitable. Complex historical paintings, historical portraits and landscapes were still in vogue.

"There was little incentive," scholar William Gerdtz writes in his essay for the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston exhibition "Two Centuries of American Still-Life Painting."

The show features 67 works that Houston collectors Frank and Michelle Hevrdejs have pledged to the museum — a unique survey that examines the evolution of the genre from Peale's day to the present.

Peale's small "Orange and Book," from about 1817, starts it off in a serene, thoughtful mode. Step through the galleries to another image with a spiraling peel of citrus, and you have a sense of how far things have progressed: Scott Fraser's seriously vertical 2014 "Lemon, Lemon" pays funny homage to Peale with impossibly long peels trailing from a pair of lemons that rest on the edge of simple wooden shelves.

The show flows chronologically through four galleries: a room of 19th-century flower and fruit paintings, a room of

trompe l'oeil pictures, a large space where Impressionism and early-20th-century Modernism converge and a gallery of contemporary still-lives.

Though European influences come into play across it all, the early paintings also have "distinctly American" elements, MFAH curator Kalin Weber suggests.

For one thing, the objects depicted are American. But trompe l'oeil work — paintings full of illusionary tricks — were exclusive to American painting in the 19th century, Weber said. "There's a wit and a charm about them that you don't really find in still-life painting elsewhere in the world at that time."

The trompe l'oeil works often depict man-made objects, including three paintings that have real-looking money. For instance, Nicholas Alden



Scott Fraser's "Lemon, Lemon," 2014, pays tribute to Peale.

'Two Centuries of American Still-Life Painting: THE FRANK AND MICHELLE HEVRDEJS COLLECTION'

When: 12:15-7 p.m. Sundays, 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays-Wednesdays, 10 a.m.-9 p.m. Thursdays, 10 a.m.-7 p.m. Fridays-Saturdays; also 10 a.m.-5 p.m. this Monday (Martin Luther King Jr. holiday)

Where: Beck Building, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 5601 Main

Tickets: \$7.50-\$15 (free on Thursdays); 713-639-7300, mfa.org

Brooks, represented with "Still Life With \$5 Bill, Ticket Stub and Newspaper," was arrested because his currency painting was too realistic to pass counterfeit laws.

Frank Hevrdejs loves all that's going on in Otis Kaye's "What a Hit!" from 1932, which features stacks of U.S. currency in the shape of a baseball diamond on a surface that looks like worn wood planks. A baseball shatters the wood, and there are collaged-looking elements that include tickets, a picture of Babe Ruth and newspaper clippings.

Kaye was responding to a World Series game between the New York Yankees and the Chicago Cubs, in which Ruth hit a ball through a wood wall.

With the title, Hevrdejs said, the artist also was referring to the economy during the Great Depression. "There's an awful lot going on in here. People were starving," he said.

Though it might seem like still-life paintings are decorative by definition, Hevrdejs isn't big on pretense.

He loves the humble attitude of "Christina's Teapot," which Andrew Wyeth painted in 1968 as a memorial to the subject of his most famous painting, "Christina's World."

"You just have to imagine that you're this girl with polio, and that's your favorite possession," he said. "The house is very rudimentary. A lot of these houses in Maine were not built well."

Another of Hevrdejs'

favorites is Joseph Decker's "Bough of Pears With Yellow Jackets," from 1884-85.

"When I was a kid, we had a neighbor that had a fence like that, and I used to eat their pears that grew over on our side, and I got stung by a yellow-jacket," he said. "When I saw this painting, I had to have it. It reminds me of being a 10-year-old."

Michelle Hevrdejs, his wife of the past eight years, has become an enthusiastic art partner. She likes some of the older paintings for similar reasons: Growing up on a farm in Indiana, she chewed on honeycombs

and loved the blooms of the peonies that grew like wildflowers.

Though Frank Hevrdejs collected some of the show's works more than 30 years ago, today the couple doesn't buy anything that doesn't "speak" to them.

"I'm kind of the one that's out there beating the bushes," he said. "But I ask her for a thumbs-up or thumbs-down. It works pretty well."

Michelle laughed, remembering the first time she visited him in Houston, about 12 years ago, and saw his collection.

"I'm thinking, 'Good god, I hope he doesn't think I'm going to remember all this,'" she said. "But now I do. There's some you feel very personal about and some you just enjoy aesthetically."

The Hevrdejses enjoy the collection's temporary works partly because they've gotten to know the artists.

One of the most recent paintings, Jacob Collins' "Vanitas With Kentucky Bourbon," harkens back

to that first Old Master painting Hevrdejs saw as a kid visiting the Art Institute of Chicago — a composition with a human skull and earthly possessions, symbolizing mortality and vanity.

Hevrdejs remembers his mother asking him what he saw in that piece.

"A rich dead guy with his stuff," he responded.

By 2013, he wanted a vanitas painting of his own, and he asked Collins to paint it.

When the artist sent him a sketch, he liked everything but the color of the wine in the antique-looking wine decanter, which he thought appeared too dark.

The artist shot back, "It's not wine. I like bourbon. It's my painting."

The patron acquiesced. "It's all about, 'Don't get too attached to your stuff because we're all going to end up like this,'" Hevrdejs said. "I love this painting. Of the living artist paintings, it's my favorite."

molly.glentzer@chron.com

ALLEY THEATRE

DRY POWDER

By Sarah Burgess
Directed by Talbi Magar

A Razor Sharp Play About the Real Price of Success

BEGINS JANUARY 20

Contains explicit language and adult content.

ALLEYTHEATRE.ORG
713.220.5700

UNITED
Official Airline of Alley Theatre