

## The Cup We All Race 4: Recent Technical Findings

*The Cup We All Race 4* (fig. 1), by John Frederick Peto, is one of the most famous trompe l'oeil paintings in America and a cornerstone of the Museums' collection. Trompe l'oeil paintings are intended to fool the eye with their realistic compositions. Peto's painting goes a step further by integrating the frame into the painting itself, breaking the boundary between the two. The artist treated the flat wooden frame with the same attention he paid to the canvas, toning it green and adding false nails and the remains of a card, seemingly tacked to the upper right corner, in paint. The title words are painted on both frame and painting as if they were crudely cut into wood. Only "CUP" is painted on the canvas itself, emphasizing the iconic presentation of the humble, utilitarian object.

The painting will be included in the exhibition *Audubon to Warhol: The Art of American Still Life*, opening at the Philadelphia Museum of Art (PMA) next year. In the course of his research for the catalogue, Mark D. Mitchell, associate



Fig. 1. John Frederick Peto, *The Cup We All Race 4*, 1905. Oil on canvas and wood. FAMSF, gift of Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller 3rd



Fig. 2. Detail, transmitted infrared image

curator of American art at the PMA, contacted Timothy Anglin Burgard, Ednah Root Curator in Charge of American Art at the Fine Arts Museums, to confirm the painting's date. Although the painting had been dated circa 1905 since it entered the collection in 1979, Mitchell noticed that it was given the specific date of 1905 in the catalogue of a landmark exhibition of the artist's work in 1950 organized by the Brooklyn Museum. Prompted by the inquiry, the painting was brought to the Sardegna Paintings Conservation Center at the de Young to be examined.

Although *The Cup We All Race 4* is affixed at the frame with a small, engraved metal plate with the artist's name, there is no other signature on the front of the painting. Peto sometimes signed the reverse of his paintings, but this canvas was lined with another piece of fabric in the middle of the 20th century, so the back is not visible. Head paintings conservator Elise Effmann Clifford examined the painting with transmitted infrared imaging to see if a hidden inscription on the reverse could be found. An infrared-sensitive camera can penetrate layers of paint and

canvas, revealing the artist's preparatory underdrawing, changes made in underlayers of paint, and even hidden inscriptions. For this technique to be successful, the artist would have needed to use black ink or pencil, both of which contain carbon. Whereas most paint layers are transparent to infrared light, carbon is visible. When Clifford performed this process, there was an exciting discovery. The inscription, lost for over 60 years, was revealed in black and white on her computer screen: "J.F.Peto / Island Heights, N.J. / 1905" (see fig. 2).

Conservators also X-rayed the painting, which revealed an interesting change made by the artist. Originally, Peto had painted "WE ALL RACE 4" below the cup, allowing the painted object itself to stand in for "THE CUP" (see fig. 3). He then reconsidered the composition and painted the full title to span both canvas and frame. The hidden words made visible in the X-ray provide a glimpse into the evolution of the work and Peto's process.



Fig. 3. Detail, X-radiograph