



Fig. 1: Raphaelle Peal (1774–1825), *Still Life of Watermelon and Grapes*, circa 1821. Oil on panel, 12¾ x 19 inches. Private collection. Image courtesy Thomas Colville Fine Art, LLC.

Early American Still Life

by Erik Brockett

PART I

Still life—the representation of inanimate objects—is an early and enduring artistic theme. Yet when compared with portraiture, landscape, and history painting, still life has generally been relegated to the lower rungs of the thematic hierarchy of painting. Within the context of American art history, still life works received little attention until 1971 when Professor William Gerds published the first important study of the subject; since then attitudes have warmed.¹

The scarcity of examples of pure still life in American painting prior to the early 1800s make an analysis of its origins difficult, however, some reasons for its absence can be inferred. While the

seventeenth century witnessed an unprecedented demand for accurate and pleasing depictions of naturally occurring and man-made items throughout continental Europe, this trend did not extend to England, the country that most readily influenced American taste. The Puritanical culture dominant in New England provided a climate in which the English predilection for portraiture was accepted. But still life works may have been judged superfluous, and less likely than family representations to have been preserved.² Still life elements do, however, appear regularly in colonial portraiture,

Fig. 2: James Peal (1749–1831), *Still Life with Fruit*, 1829. Oil on canvas, 20 x 26½ inches. Inscribed on verso: "Property of M. A. Peale / Painted by James Peale / in the 80th Year of his age / 1829 / Presented to [illeg.] / 183." Private collection. Photograph courtesy Spanierman Gallery, LLC, NY.

reflecting the artist's desire to create a more engaging composition or to convey a message. Flowers representing beauty or fruit suggesting fecundity often appear in portraits of females. In male portraits, the presence of books signified knowledge, and dead game suggest the sitter's ability to provide. These devices are to be found in portraits by the leading artists of the era, including John Smibert (1688–1751), John Singleton Copley (1738–1815), and Benjamin West (1738–1820). Although there are no extant independent still life works by these painters, written evidence supports the probability that artists in colonial America did paint still life subjects, and that such works were imported from abroad, especially as life grew more comfortable and increasing attention was paid to material wealth.

The first true school of American still life painting began with the Peale family of painters. Its patriarch, Charles Willson Peale (1741–1827), studied with Benjamin West in London, then rose to prominence as a portrait and natural history painter and settled in Philadelphia. This city, with its sizable Germanic population, was probably predisposed to still life works given the Germanic folk tradition of fruit and flower painting and a likely familiarity with Dutch still lifes.³ Peale's technical ability, combined with his role as a museum curator and cofounder of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art, solidified his standing as one of the most important artistic figures of the Revolutionary era and early Republic. Although some of his works included still life passages, it is his brother James Peale (1749–1831) and eldest son, Raphaele Peale (1774–1825), who can lay claim to being the earliest Americans to pursue this genre in earnest. Both studied with Charles





Fig. 3: John F. Francis (1808–1886), *Abundance of Fruit*, 1858. Oil on canvas, 24½ x 30 inches. Signed lower right. Courtesy Godel & Co. Fine Art, NY.

Willson Peale and both were occupied as portrait painters before focusing on the still life subjects they are best known for today. This change of subject was manifest first in Raphaëlle's work in around 1812 and in James's twelve years later. The sharply delineated elements arranged in a balanced neoclassic composition, the unevenly lit bare background, and the subject placed parallel with the picture plane, as in Raphaëlle's *Still life of Watermelon and Grapes*, circa 1821 (Fig. 1), typify his work. Although there are many similarities in their still lifes, James's work is more romanticized; age spots appear on fruit suggesting its transience, and he had a preference for irregular forms. In his *Still life with Fruit*, 1829 (Fig. 2), the watermelon has been roughly cut open, whereas Raphaëlle most often painted them cleanly sliced.

Following the death of James Peal there was little activity in the field of American still life painting until the mid-nineteenth century. A notable exception was the work of the Philadelphia painter Joseph Biays Ord (1805–1865), who acts as a chronological and stylistic link between the Peale family and subsequent artists. He was a portrait and figure painter until the late 1830s when he made still life painting his primary focus. Though rooted in the Peale tradition, Ord's paintings tend to be more complex in their arrangements of objects and their variation in size. Also seen in his work is an increased profusion of goods, foreshadowing the still life paintings of the 1850s and 1860s that pay tribute to American bounty and appealed to the optimism of its

burgeoning middle class. Typified by the work of John F. Francis (1808–1886) and Severin Roesen (circa 1815–1872), these later paintings feature lavish arrangements of flowers or ripe fruit and became a required component of the well decorated dining room.

Best known for his “luncheon” and “dessert” works showing elegantly set tables with edibles ready for consumption, John F. Francis was one of the most accomplished still life painters

Fig. 4: Severin Roesen (circa 1815–1871), *Still Life of Bird's Nest, Fruits, and Flowers in a Glass Pitcher*, 1862. Oil on canvas, 40¼ x 30 inches. Signed lower right. Courtesy MME Fine Art, LLC, NY.





of his era. Born in Philadelphia, he was primarily self-trained and worked as an itinerant portrait painter before turning to still life subjects. In the mid-1840s he began to exhibit at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and the Philadelphia Art-Union, where in 1851 he showed twelve still life paintings. The rise of the art unions in major cities, which displayed and distributed artwork through lottery drawings, did much to broaden the taste for still life painting. Unlike the somber works of earlier still life practitioners, Francis rendered subjects in bright and cheerful tones. In *Abundance of Fruit* dating from 1858 (Fig. 3), a wicker basket containing peaches is placed on a slightly angled surface in the center of the diagonally receding composition. Over the basket handle is draped a white cloth, a device repeatedly used by Francis. Elsewhere in the composition grapes are draped above melons that have been opened to reveal their interiors.⁴

Although a prolific artist and well-known for his contribution to the evolution of still life painting in this country, much remains to be learned about Severin Roesen. He was born circa-1815 in Germany, possibly near Cologne, where he is known to have exhibited a flower painting in 1847. The following year he arrived in New York City and began to exhibit at the American Art Union, a venue at which he would continue to show until its closing in 1852. Roesen left New York for Pennsylvania in 1858, living in several cities before eventually settling in the town of Williamsport. Here he found a market for his paintings and was active in this city until 1872, after which point there is no further

Fig. 5: George Henry Hall (1825–1913), *Lilacs*, 1872. Oil on canvas, 10¼ x 12½ inches. Signed and dated at lower right: “Geo. H. Hall / 1872.” Courtesy Menconi & Schoelkopf Fine Art, NY.

known information about him. His large format representations of fruits and flowers often incorporate glassware, ceramics, or bird nests, with more than one surface often used to display the abundant bounty. Roesen’s 1862 *Still Life of Bird’s Nest, Fruits, and Flowers in a Glass Pitcher* (Fig. 4) includes many of the hallmarks of his work, among them, a bird’s nest, a motif popular with Jacob Preyer (1803–1889), a leading still life artist of the Düsseldorf school who exhibited in this country.

Better known in his time than either Francis or Roesen was George Henry Hall

(1825–1913). Born in Manchester, New Hampshire, Hall grew up in Boston, where he began painting at the age of sixteen. In 1849 he traveled to Europe, studying in Düsseldorf and Paris before opening a studio in Rome. In 1852 he returned to New York City, where in around 1857 he began painting still life subjects. He was financially successful, well traveled, and exhibited widely over the course of his career, showing both at home and abroad. Hall subscribed to John Ruskin's (1819–1900) belief in the superiority of direct observation of nature—a sentiment embraced by increasing numbers of American painters in the late 1850s—nevertheless he continued to create indoor still life subjects. Although painted in 1872, a point in his career when he produced more figure subjects than still life paintings, Hall's *Lilacs* (Fig. 5) illustrates his continued interest in this genre. Consisting of a single lilac branch lying on verdant moss, the work derives its strength from its simplicity, which allows for an appreciation of Hall's ability to describe the lilac's polished leaves and myriad open buds.

Another leading figure in the field of American still life painting during the mid-nineteenth century was William Mason Brown (1828–1898). A native of Troy, New York, Brown studied with Abel Buel Moore (1806–1879) and painted portraits in Troy before moving to Newark, New Jersey, where he shifted his focus to the creation of romantic landscape paintings. Following a move to Brooklyn, New York, in 1858 his subject matter again changed, this time to still life, at which he excelled. With this shift in subject came a new stylistic approach in which the softness of his earlier work was supplanted by careful attention to detail, resulting in highly realistic productions emphasizing the textures of his chosen subjects. This style of painting lent itself well to reproduction via lithography and Brown gained increased recognition through this medium. Although he supported Ruskin's theories and situated his fruits and flowers in a natural setting, like Hall, he also created tabletop subjects. Dating from 1874, his *Basket of Currants* (Fig. 6)



Fig. 6: William Mason Brown (1828–1898), *Basket of Currants*, 1874. Oil on canvas, 10 x 8¼ inches. Signed and dated at lower right: "WMBrown / 1874." Courtesy Menconi & Schoelkopf Fine Art, NY.

exemplifies his ability to render tightly painted representations of fruit in a domestic context. The light reflecting off the translucent skin of each berry also illuminates the weave of the basket and the folds of the tablecloth underneath it. Here, man-made objects share equal space with the berries. In other paintings, Brown emphasized the man-made, pointing toward the celebration of bric-a-brac that characterizes American still life painting in the post-Civil War era—the subject of American Still Life Part II, to be published in a forthcoming issue. 🍷

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¹ William Gerdtz, *Painters of the Humble Truth: Masterpieces of American Still Life 1801–1939* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1981).

² Ibid, 35.

³ Information from the Butler Institute of American Art website, (www.butlerart.com). Discussion of Francis's *Still Life with Fruit* by H. Daniel Butts III.

⁴ William Gerdtz, *Painters of the Humble Truth: Masterpieces of American Still Life 1801–1939* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1981), 62.