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NATIONAL GALLERY CELEBRATES ITS BIRTHDAY

WITH WAYNE THIEBAUD'S "CAKES"

Washington, D.C., January 10, 1991 -- Wayne Thiebaud's 1963 painting, Cakes, has been given to the National Gallery in honor of its fiftieth anniversary, director J. Carter Brown announced today. The monumental painting (oil on canvas, 60 x 72 inches), a witty composition depicting nearly thirteen lavishly decorated cakes, is a gift of the Collectors Committee, the 50th Anniversary Gift Committee, and The Circle, with additional support from the Abrams family in Memory of Harry N. Abrams. The first painting by Thiebaud in the National Gallery collection, Cakes will go on view to the public on March 17, 1991, as part of the exhibition Art for the Nation: Gifts in Honor of the 50th Anniversary of the National Gallery of Art.

"We have had our eye on this wonderful painting for a couple of years and are delighted that it is coming into the nation's collection at this festive moment," said Brown. "A unique combination of donors led by our Collectors Committee, 50th Anniversary Gift Committee, and The Circle of the National Gallery made this acquisition possible, and we are grateful for their collective generosity."

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Cakes is the second gift made possible by the Gallery's 50th Anniversary Gift Committee, chaired by Gallery trustee Robert H. Smith. The Committee's primary gift to the nation, The Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew, 1634, by Jusepe de Ribera, the first Ribera to enter the collection, will also be seen for the first time in the gift exhibition opening on March 17, the 50th anniversary of the National Gallery.

Painted at a critical juncture in the artist's career, Cakes is unparalleled in ambition and scale among all his still life paintings. Although American food has been Thiebaud's best-known subject since 1953, it was not until 1960-1961 that he developed the distinctive imagery and style that is associated with his mature still lifes. In 1962, his recent paintings of ice cream cones, pies, and gumball machines, on view in two New York galleries, received critical acclaim and earned him the reputation as a major exponent of West Coast pop art. Although these mass-produced foodstuffs were seen as satirical comments on American culture, the artist has maintained that they are objects of true affection and nostalgia.

For Thiebaud (born 1920), still life is a means of exploring the formal properties of painting. The cakes are isolated against a simple, neutral background in a clearly ordered grid pattern that underscores their essential geometry and calls to mind a display case or cafeteria counter.

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As Cakes illustrates, Thiebaud commands a masterful manipulation of paint. With swirls and dabs of delectably thick pigment he skillfully deploys his brush to mimic the very substance of rich buttery frosting. By now a trademark of his still lifes, the heavily impastoed stroke and the sensuous surface that results set Thiebaud's paintings apart from the work of many pop artists who minimized the nuances of the artist's hand.

A colorist of the first rank, Thiebaud endowed the cakes with a remarkable luminosity and chromatic richness. Although he closely studies the optical properties of his subjects under a harsh, white light, he departs from a merely local description. He paints the edges of the cakes in bright colors that travel around their perimeters like blinking neon lights.

Thiebaud grew up in Long Beach, California, and as a youngster worked preparing food on the boardwalk. He was a commercial artist for ten years before becoming a painter and a highly influential professor of art at the University of California at Davis, a post he has held for 30 years. Long recognized as one of the most important figurative artists to emerge in the 1960s, Thiebaud has always resisted association with the pop movement and refers to himself as a traditional painter. Profoundly interested in the nature of realism, he has investigated this style both as a teacher and as a painter.

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Thiebaud, also an accomplished painter of figures and city-scapes, has said that he is attracted to the subject of food in part because of the ritualistic practices surrounding its presentation, and consumption. Cakes, particularly the elaborately decorated variety depicted in this painting, have a celebratory function associated with birthdays and anniversaries.