

# National Gallery of Art

## NEWS RELEASE

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PRESS CONTACT: Deborah Ziska  
(202) 842-6353

**FIRST RETROSPECTIVE IN 30 YEARS**  
**OF AMERICAN ARTIST MARTIN JOHNSON HEADE**  
**ON VIEW AT NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART, FEBRUARY 13- MAY 7, 2000**

Washington, D.C. -- The first retrospective exhibition in thirty years of the work of Martin Johnson Heade (1819-1904), widely recognized as one of America's greatest romantic painters, will be on view at the National Gallery of Art, February 13 - May 7, 2000. Heade produced perhaps the most varied body of work of any American painter of the nineteenth century. Seventy-four paintings—including landscapes, seascapes, still lifes, and botanicals—are presented. Martin Johnson Heade is organized by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, where it was on view last fall. It will travel to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, May 28 - August 17, 2000.

The exhibition in Washington is made possible by The Circle of the National Gallery of Art. In 1996 The Circle, an annual-giving program, also made possible the Gallery's acquisition of Heade's Giant Magnolias on a Blue Velvet Cloth (c. 1885-1895). Support for the exhibition and accompanying catalogue has been provided by The Henry Luce Foundation and the Vira I. Heinz Endowment.

"In an era when American artists excelled in portraying nature, Heade stands out for his unusual and diverse subject matter," said Earl A. Powell III, director, National Gallery of Art. "We are grateful to the private collectors and museums who have been extremely generous in granting the loans of Heade's greatest paintings."

In his own lifetime Heade was not considered an important artist and was nearly forgotten after his death in 1904. Not until 1943, with the rediscovery of the mysterious Thunder Storm on Narragansett Bay (1868), was the work of this inventive and prolific artist collected and studied. The son of a farmer, Heade was born in 1819. He began to paint at the age of 18, traveling the length and breadth of America and journeying to Europe to learn his trade, while painting portraits, genre scenes, and copies of American and European portraits.

Becoming interested in landscape painting in 1857, Heade developed his own approach to the subject, taking elements of technique from the Hudson River School and adapting them to his uses. He was a keen observer of the physical world, but was also a romantic and a loner. Where his contemporaries in the Hudson River School presented epic sunset scenes of the Catskill Mountains or of the Hudson Valley, Heade painted salt

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marshes of the East Coast. More than 120 views of salt marshes make up one-fifth of his total output. In works such as Salt Marsh Hay (c. 1866-1876) Heade presents the marsh in the dramatic light of an approaching thunderstorm. In Hayfields: A Clear Day (c. 1871-1880), the flooded marsh shimmers in the golden rays of the afternoon sun.

Another of Heade's singular subjects was hummingbirds, which he depicted either on their own or in juxtaposition with equally exotic tropical orchids or passionflowers. Hummingbirds are referred to as "gems" or "jewels" because of their iridescent feathers, and Heade was, as he put it, a "monomaniac" on the subject. He painted many small works for an unrealized book that was to have been titled The Gems of Brazil. The paintings, created in the Gems format—vertical composition, approximately 12 by 10 inches, depicted both the male and female of various species. It is not known conclusively if they were painted for the book, but a renowned series of small hummingbird paintings, also called The Gems of Brazil (c. 1864-1865), are here on loan from the preeminent Heade collector of our time, Richard Manoogian. An Amethyst Hummingbird with a White Orchid (c. 1875-1890), from a later series, sets a tiny "gem" beside an orchid of similar coloring (the white-and-purple *Lealia purpurata*), whose petals echo the cleft shape of the hummingbird's tail.

Heade's last series of works were painted in Florida. Giant Magnolias on a Blue Velvet Cloth is a horizontal composition in which the voluptuous white flowers seem almost to glow against the soft, dark velvet, as the glossy leaves reflect the light. Heade's haunting painting seems to have more to do with the painter's memory and imagination than with fact. He was still painting up until a few weeks before his death in 1904.

The exhibition at the National Gallery is coordinated by Franklin Kelly, curator of American and British paintings, National Gallery of Art. The exhibition's organizing curator is Theodore E. Stebbins, Jr., former chair, art of the Americas, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

A fully illustrated catalogue presents new scholarly research in the study of Martin Johnson Heade's paintings with an introductory essay by Stebbins. A softcover catalogue is available for \$24.95 and a hardcover version for \$65 in the Gallery Shops and through the Gallery Web site at [www.nga.gov](http://www.nga.gov). To order by phone, call (301) 322-5900 or (800) 697-9350.

The National Gallery of Art and Sculpture Garden, located on the National Mall between Third and Ninth Streets at Constitution Avenue, NW, is open Monday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Sunday from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. The Gallery is closed on December 25 and January 1. Admission is free. For general information call (202) 737-4215 or the Telecommunications Device for the Deaf (TDD) at (202) 842-6176, or visit the National Gallery of Art's Web site at [www.nga.gov](http://www.nga.gov). To receive the Gallery's free bimonthly Calendar of Events, call (202) 842-6662.

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# National Gallery of Art

Washington, D.C.

## Backgrounder MARTIN JOHNSON HEADE

*"In all the works of his artistic maturity, Heade was a romantic masquerading as a realist. He studied the hummingbirds, the orchids and the passionflowers with the eye of a naturalist, just as he sketched the landscapes of the Northeast, Florida and Brazil using the methods of a topographical painter. Yet in each genre, the paintings have more to do with memory than fact; they speak less to the keenness of observation than to the richness of the painter's imagination."*

–Theodore E. Stebbins, Jr.  
from the exhibition catalogue  
Martin Johnson Heade

The National Gallery of Art's retrospective exhibition presents seventy-four works by Martin Johnson Heade (1819-1904). Heade had the longest career and produced perhaps the most varied body of work of any American painter of the nineteenth century. A loner for much of his life and, as an artist, a nonjoiner and unconventional in his subject matter, Heade was only moderately successful in his own day. After his death he was completely forgotten. Rediscovered less than 57 years ago, he is now appreciated as an artist of great significance and originality.

The son of a farmer in rural Pennsylvania, by the age of eighteen Heade had begun to paint, learning the rudiments of the craft from his Bucks County neighbor, the folk artist Edward Hicks. At the age of twenty-four, he moved to New York City, and for the next fifteen years traveled throughout the United States and Europe, developing his trade while painting portraits, genre scenes, and copies of famous American and European portraits. He spent the next two years abroad, largely in Rome.

During the mid-1850s, Heade became interested in landscape, in which, along with still lifes, he soon began to specialize. In an era when it was rare for an artist to specialize in more than one type of painting, he stands out as one artist whose landscapes, marines, and still lifes are equally powerful. Heade soon developed his own approach to landscapes, adapting techniques from the Hudson River School, but depicting subjects that were his alone. In 1859 he produced his first marine paintings, including Approaching Thunder Storm, and his earliest marsh scenes. Of the landscapes he produced, from 1859-1904, about half are marsh scenes, one-quarter are seashore views, and the remaining are more typical Hudson River School: mountain valleys, wooded pastures, and the like. Heade painted between fifteen and twenty-five works annually and also arranged for their shipping, framing, and exhibition; he also published poetry and articles.

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## **Seashore Views and Marshes**

Heade's shore scenes took up much of the years between 1859 and 1863. Of two basic types, the first depicts a restless, ink-dark sea beneath the light of advancing thunderclouds. These paintings have been thought to express his own anguished feelings about the Civil War; Heade was a Northern partisan. Approaching Thunder Storm is almost surreal in its portentous atmosphere. The dark bay looks to modern eyes like a black hole. The second type of shore scene is quieter. Here the low sun, reflected in the water, is either just setting or burning through a morning haze. Twilight, Singing Beach (1863) is just such a peaceful scene, where the low-tide waves lap the shore in the fading light.

In an era when artists of the Hudson River School focused on grand scenes of waterfalls and mountains, Heade's choice of depicting boggy marshes was an unusual one. Heade painted more than 120 marsh scenes, in every sort of light. Hayfields: A Clear Day (c. 1871-1880) has an atmosphere as warm as gold leaf, while Marshfield Meadows (c. 1877-1878), a similar scene, is all cool blue, green, and gray.

## **Early Still Lifes**

Heade was a great sportsman and lover of the outdoors, but he never painted the typical still lifes of dead game and fruit. Instead, he painted flowers. Heade's early still lifes have a naturalness that captures the essence of his simple bouquets. Some of his best pictures, such as Red Flower in a Vase (c. 1871-1880), feature a single dramatic blossom, in this case, a double crinum lily.

In Red Flower in a Vase Heade sets the flowers against a dark velvet curtain with a gold fringe that echoes the yellow stamens of the lily. Starlike acacia blossoms and a gold box add luxuriance to the composition.

## **Hummingbirds**

Heade described himself as a "monomaniac" on the subject of hummingbirds, which, with their iridescent feathers, have been referred to as "jewels" or "gems." He painted a series of approximately forty-five small paintings, ten-by-twelve-inch vertical compositions depicting the male and female of various species, often near their nest, with a landscape background. In Rio de Janeiro in 1864 Heade exhibited twelve of his small hummingbird paintings, The Gems of Brazil (c. 1864), and was honored by the emperor, Dom Pedro II. He later traveled to London to have his paintings chromolithographed for a book on the hummingbirds of Brazil, but the project was never completed. Nevertheless, Heade enjoyed enthusiastic patronage on both sides of the Atlantic.

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Another "new line," begun in 1870, was a series of paintings pairing hummingbirds with exotic passionflowers or orchids. These astonishing works, which combine traditional landscape elements with ornithological and botanical illustration, have no precedents within either American or European art. Heade often plays with matching similarities of gesture or form between the exotic birds and flowers. In An Amethyst Hummingbird with a White Orchid (c. 1875-1890), the hummingbird's iridescent ruby throat resembles in color and shape the throat of the orchid, *Lealia purpurata*. The cleft shape of the bird's tail is echoed in the fall of the orchid's petals and by the olive-green sepals encasing the bud.

In 1883, at the age of 64, Heade finally settled in St. Augustine, Florida, and married. Two-thirds of the paintings he made between 1883 and his death in 1904 are still lifes, the other third comprises landscapes and two portraits.

### **Florida: The Late Works**

Although Heade did paint landscapes, his still lifes are considered his most inventive works. Fascinated now with the southern magnolia, *Magnolia grandiflora*, as he previously had been with orchids and passionflowers, he painted the flower again and again, taking it from the vase and laying the cut branches upon soft, light-absorbing backgrounds of red, brown, or deep blue velvet.

The fleshy, white petals of the magnolia blossoms appear almost to glow in such paintings as Giant Magnolias on a Blue Velvet Cloth (c. 1885-1895). In contrast to the flowers, the glossy leaves softly reflect the light, while the velvet provides a soft, matte foil. Giant Magnolias on a Blue Velvet Cloth is thought to be the culmination of Heade's series of horizontal paintings of magnolia branches. Although these beautiful works received little attention in his lifetime, today they are appreciated for their sensuality and undertones of mystery.

In Florida, Heade at last found peace and permanence. In his sixties and seventies, Heade continued to paint in the now out-of-date realist style, and he produced some of the most remarkable still lifes in American art. Sixty-seven years after he had begun, he was still working up until a few weeks before his death in September 1904.

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# THE CIRCLE

OF THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

The Circle of the National Gallery of Art is delighted to sponsor the presentation of *Martin Johnson Heade* in the nation's capital. Just as the paintings of this American master depict a vast variety of regional scenery and natural life, The Circle's membership represents friends of the National Gallery across the entire country and abroad.

Founded in 1986, The Circle is a growing group of generous supporters who make annual unrestricted gifts to the National Gallery of Art. These funds make possible many critical Gallery activities, such as art and library acquisition, conservation, research, educational outreach, and outstanding exhibitions such as *Martin Johnson Heade*.

Throughout its history, the National Gallery has relied on an important partnership of public and private support. The Circle is a significant philanthropic source, collectively providing over \$10 million to date. As such important friends, Circle members enjoy a close relationship with the Gallery, and know that their generosity helps the National Gallery of Art maintain its magnificent standards in everything it does.

As chair of The Circle, I take special pride in the fact that the Gallery's own *Giant Magnolias on a Blue Velvet Cloth*, acquired by The Circle in 1996 in honor of its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary, is featured in the *Martin Johnson Heade* exhibition. We welcome everyone who would like to join us and be a part of The Circle; membership information is available from The Circle office as listed below.

On behalf of the National Gallery of Art, I extend heartfelt thanks to each and every member of The Circle for helping to make this wonderful exhibition possible, and offer a warm welcome to all its visitors.

Juliet C. Folger  
Chair