ARTFUL DECEIT: TROMPE L'OEIL AND THE PURSUIT OF THE REAL

Trompe l'oeil, an expression meaning "to deceive the eye," originated in a French painter's description of his work in 1800. Artists, however, had already been striving for centuries to create artworks that could fool the senses—the ancient Roman writer Pliny the Elder recounted that the Greek painter Zeuxis could depict such realistic grapes that birds would fly off their perches to peck them. *Artful Deceit* showcases examples of the American tradition of trompe l'oeil from the antebellum era to the present. The style

flourished in the Philadelphia region during the 19th century, with some of the most celebrated practitioners including William Michael Harnett, John Frederick Peto, and John Haberle. The artworks assembled here demonstrate a range of trompe l'oeil techniques while reflecting the varying artistic motivations and societal pressures that inspired their creation. A range of contemporary works also demonstrate how artists continue to engage with the trompe l'oeil tradition, echoing past compositions or using new technologies to create the sensation that an object is close enough to touch.

De Scott Evans (1847–1898)

Free Sample—Try One, ca. 1888

Oil on canvas

Purchased with the Museum Volunteers' Fund, 1984

Raphaelle Peale (1774–1825)

Still Life with Peach Halves, 1822

Oil on wood panel

Museum purchase, 1983

James Peale (1749–1831)

Still Life with Fruit on a Tabletop, ca. 1825

Oil on wood panel

Purchased with the Museum Volunteers' Fund, 2004

James Peale was among the earliest artists in the United States to paint still lifes (his nephew, Raphaelle Peale, is widely credited as the first). While this bountiful arrangement of grapes, apples, peaches, and pears is not strictly a trompe l'oeil work—the undefined background and dramatic shift in light make it clear this is a fictive space—Peale uses some of the same techniques that American trompe l'oeil artists would later adopt. In the foreground, a stem of grapes dangles off the table's edge, creating the illusion of three-dimensional space, and the jumbled pile of fruit heightens the feeling of depth in a relatively shallow perspectival field.

George Cope (1855–1929)

A Day's Bag, 1910

Oil on canvas

Gift of Amanda K. Berls, 1980

This composition exemplifies many of the approaches artists use to achieve the illusionistic effects of a trompe l’oeil paining: a flat or shallow background, allowing objects to seemingly project into the viewer’s space; an object (in this case, a dead canvasback duck) rendered life size; and precise, nearly indistinguishable brushwork. Here, George Cope heightens the trickery with his attention to detail on the weathered door, from nicks and holes in the woodwork to the stain of rust under the door-latch.

John F. Francis (1808–1886)

Basket of Cherries, 1863

Oil on panel

Purchased with the Museum Volunteers' Fund, 1995

Alexander Pope (1849–1924)

Two Grouse, ca. 1890–1900

Oil on canvas

Gift of Amanda K. Berls, 1980

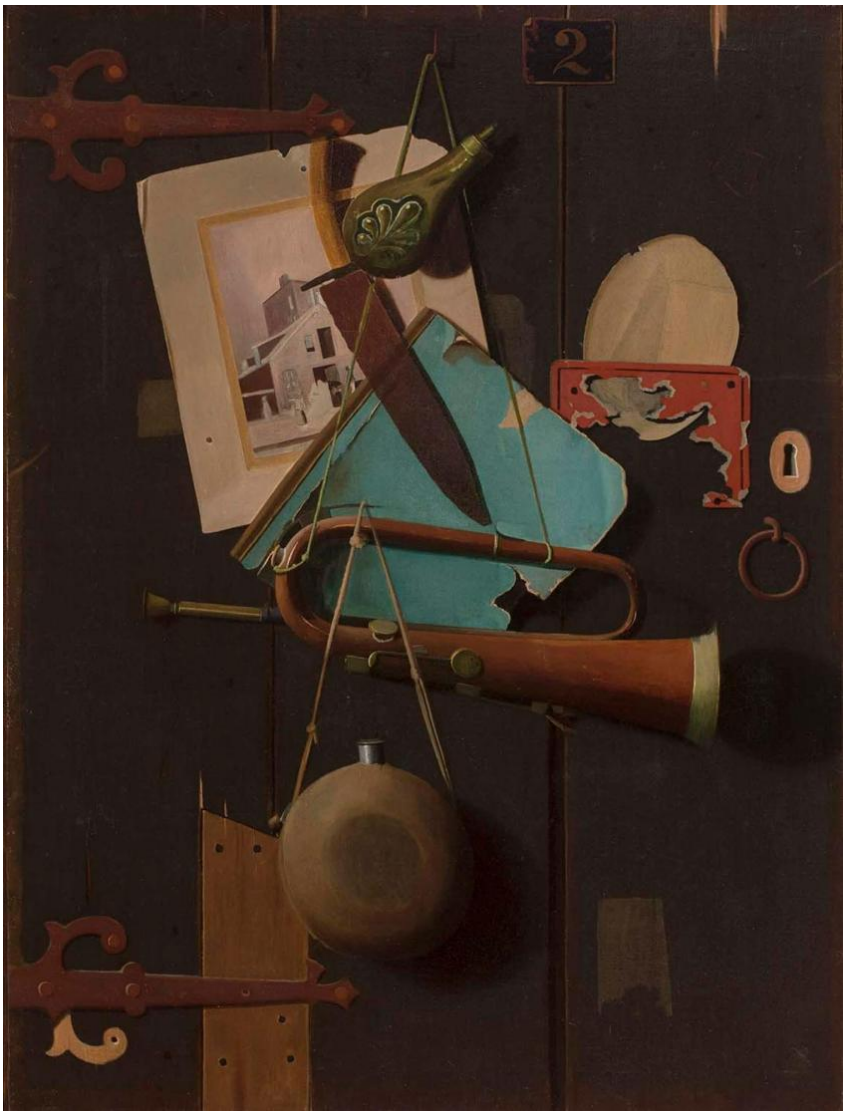
John Frederick Peto (1854–1907)

Bowie Knife, Keyed Bugle and Canteen,

1890s

Oil on canvas

Gift of Amanda K. Berls, 1980



George Cope (1855–1929)

Indian Relics, 1891

Oil on canvas

Purchased with the Museum Volunteers' Fund, 1977

John Frederick Peto (1854–1907)

Still Life with Mug, Pipe and Oyster Crackers, ca. 1880–90

Oil on academy board

Purchased with the Museum Volunteers' Fund, 1993

William Michael Harnett (1848–1892)

A Man's Table Reversed, 1877

Oil on canvas

Gift of Amanda K. Berls, 1980

Art historian Michael Leja has written about the role of texture in William Michael

Harnett’s paintings, suggesting that the impulse to touch his works stems from his mastery at depicting the surfaces of intimate, pleasurable objects that have been well-worn by human hands. Here, that sense of tactility is present in the pocked surface of the tankard and the faded, masticated wood at the lip of the pipe. This approach reflects a growing trend in American consumer culture that encouraged customers to purchase products not out of necessity, but of desire. As in several of Harnett’s paintings, the lingering embers in the pipe suggest an unseen person that has just left the table.

George Cope (1855–1929)

Oranges, 1893

Oil on canvas

Special purchase by Museum Volunteers' Cookbook Committee, 1990

Alexander Pope (1849–1924)

Do Not Feed, ca. 1895

Oil on canvas

Gift of Amanda K. Berls, 1980

William Michael Harnett (1848–1892)

Letter to Harry Tatnall, 1878

Oil on canvas

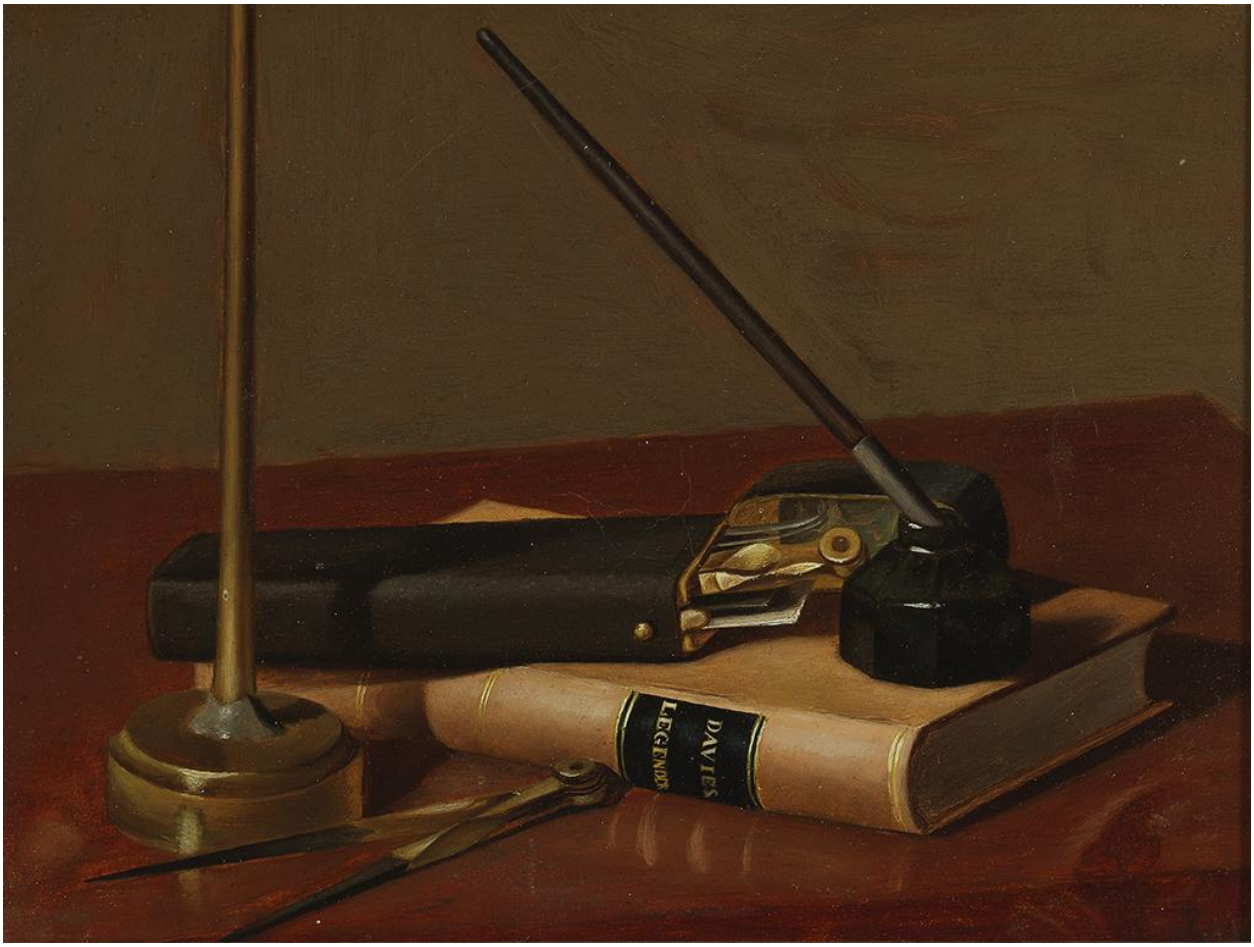
Private Collection

Elihu Vedder (1836–1923)

Drafting Instruments, 1850–60

Oil on wood panel

Gift of Amanda K. Berls, 1980

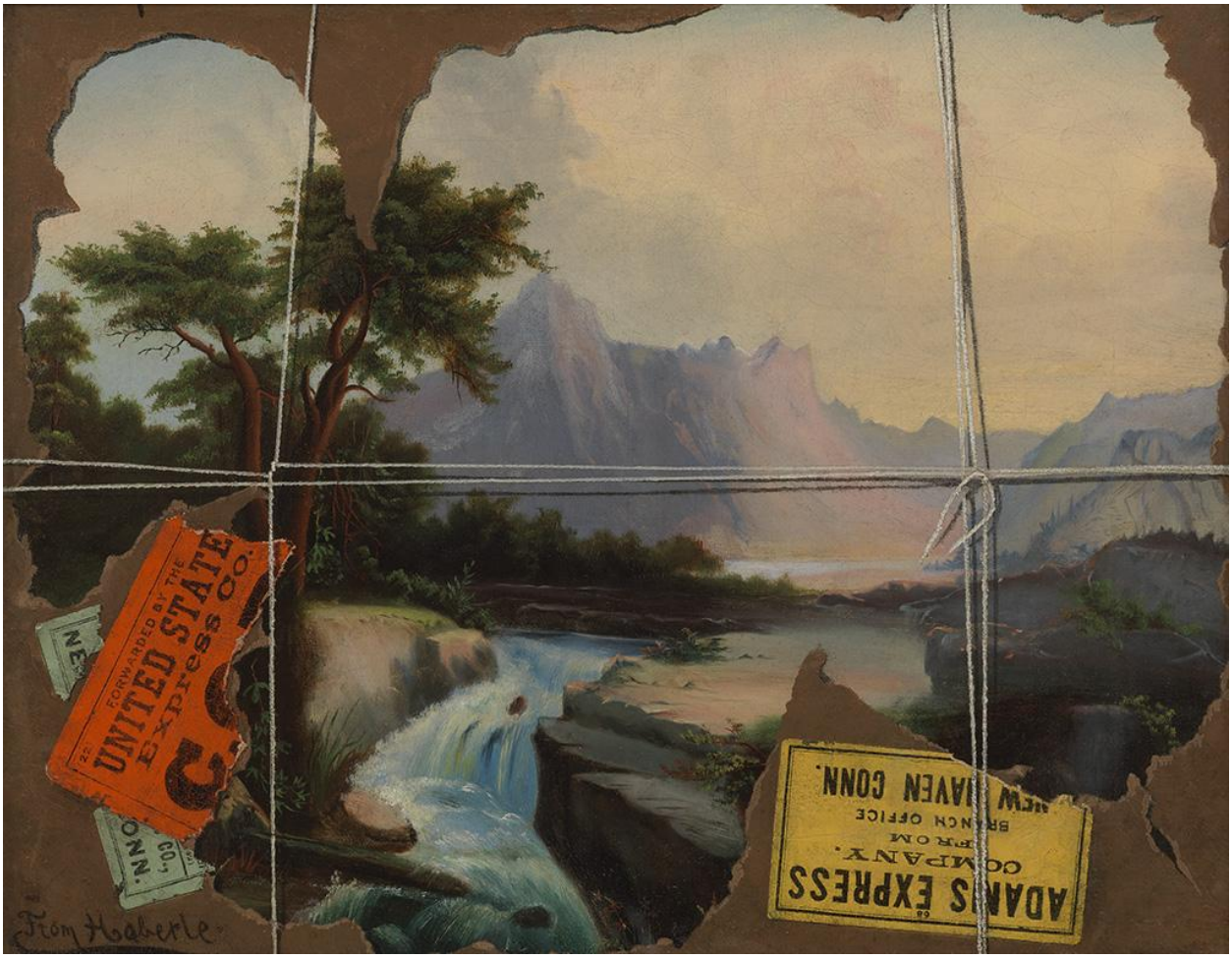


John Haberle (1856–1933)

Torn in Transit, 1890–95

Oil on canvas

Gift of Amanda K. Berls, 1980



Many artists were highly self-referential in their trompe l’oeil still lifes, depicting tools

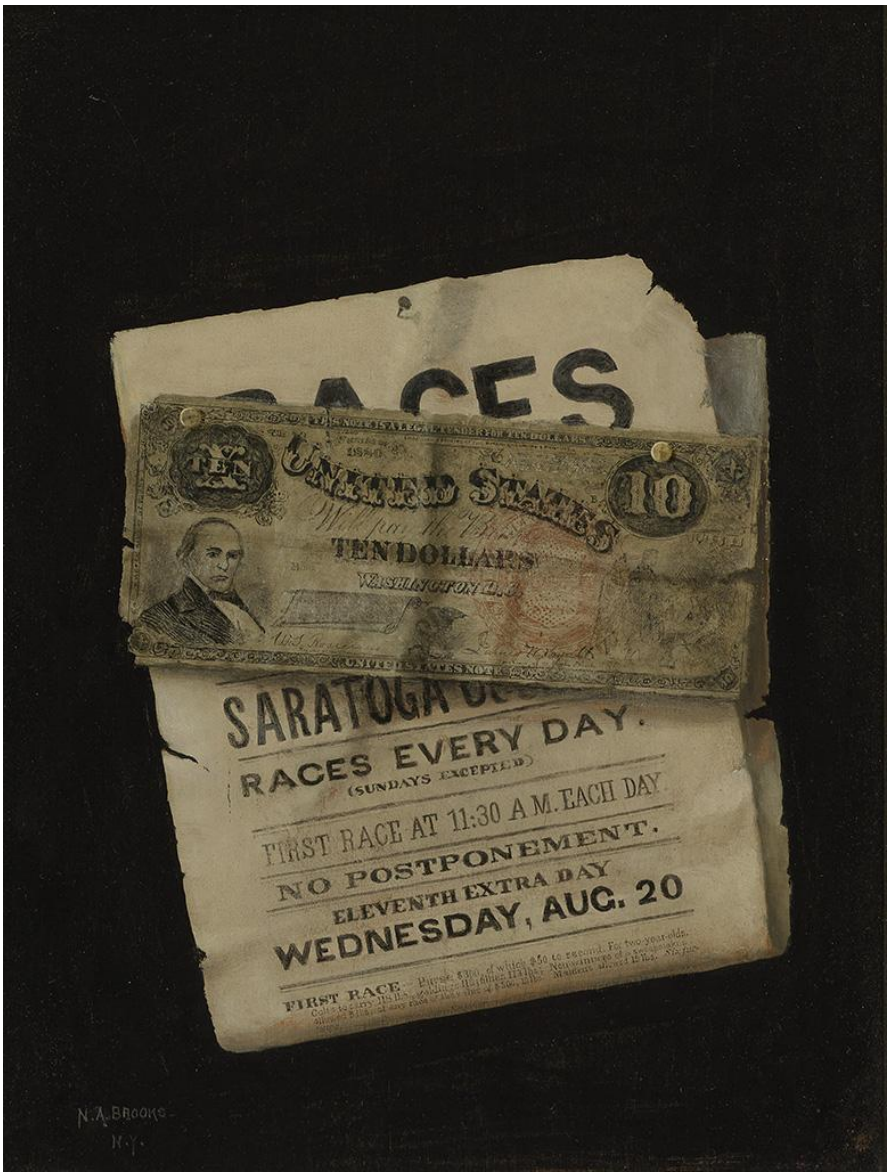
of their trade like palettes, picture frames, inkwells, and compasses. *Torn in Transit* extends the reference, with John Haberle presenting a landscape with a brown paper covering that was ripped enroute to an exhibition. Creating paintings-within-paintings had a practical benefit for the artist: after years of executing detailed trompe l'oeil works, he suffered from eye strain, and the looser brushstrokes in the landscape portion of this painting would have allowed him an opportunity to relax his vision. The landscape's hazier rendering is most apparent at the center-left of the canvas, where Haberle has layered twine, ripped paper, and "painting."

Nicholas Alden Brooks (1849–ca. 1904)

Ten Dollar Bill with Saratoga Racing Form, ca. 1880

Oil on wood panel

Gift of Amanda K. Berls, 1980



Victor Dubreuil (active 1886–1900)

Barrels of Money, 1890s

Oil on canvas

Gift of Amanda K. Berls, 1980

Victor Dubreuil painted *Barrels of Money* at a time marked by increasing wealth disparities between Americans and debates about the source of value behind paper money—gold or the more plentiful (and thus inflationary) silver. Other artists in this gallery, including William Michael Harnett and John Haberle, even caught the eye of the secret service due to their ability to produce convincing "counterfeit" money.

Very little is known about the artist, but the outlandish sums depicted in his *Barrels of Money* paintings strike at the heart of the layered anxieties of this age. Is this a

depiction of fake bills, of the sort the government feared fellow trompe l’oeil artists could produce, a lavish demonstration of Gilded Age profit, or a social commentary on the empty value of US currency?

Jefferson David Chalfant (1856–1931)

Which Is Which?, ca. 1890

Oil on wood panel with printed paper

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Richard M. Scaife and the Allegheny Foundation, 1997

Many of Jefferson David Chalfant's trompe l'oeil paintings were inspired by his artistic peers, particularly William Michael Harnett. *Which Is Which?*, however, demonstrates one of his own original contributions to the movement. Chalfant painted his subject, a four-cent Lincoln stamp, next to a real stamp, challenging his viewer to discern the difference. He replicated the raised-paper effect of a stamp by carving away painted ground at his "stamp's" perforated edges. Time, unfortunately, has played its own trick: the pasted stamp, at left, has faded more rapidly than its painted twin.

John Frederick Peto (1854–1907)

Five Dollar Bill, ca. 1885

Oil on canvas

Gift of Amanda K. Berls, 1980

Scott Fraser (b. 1957)

Cotan's Chicken Stew, 2010

Oil on copper

Anonymous gift, 2012

Greg Mort (b. 1952)

Silver Sphere, 1995

Watercolor on paper

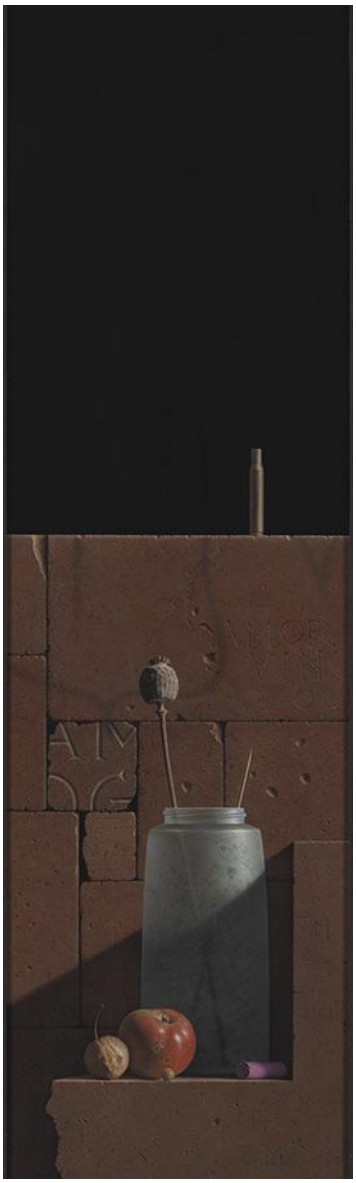
Gift of Diane L. Colgan M.D., 2014

G. Daniel Massad (b. 1946)

Mi Sol Fa, 2004

Pastel on paper

Purchased with the Museum Volunteers' Fund, 2010



James Welling (b. 1951)

Lestat, 2011

Archival inkjet print on rag paper

Gift of the artist, 2016

Lestat comes from James Welling's series of color photographs that draw on his lifelong fascination with the work of

Andrew Wyeth; here, he captures an arrangement at Wyeth's Chadds Ford studio. This series marked Welling's first experiments with digitally altering his photographs, inspired by the degree to which Wyeth himself manipulated objects, spaces, and landscapes. In this work, Welling shifted the cover of Anne Rice's novel from red to yellow, heightening the visual impact of the streaks of blue pigment and a finger's trail through the dust on the glasses case. As in William Michael Harnett's *A Man's Table Reversed*, Welling emphasizes well-worn objects to create a character study without showing a body.

John Yerger (1935–2017)

Helga (Homage to Andrew Wyeth), 2010

Oil on panel

Gift of Jan and Warren Adelson, 2011

Gary Erbe (b. 1944)

Virtuoso, 1982

Oil on canvas

Purchased with the Museum Volunteers' Fund, 2010

In *Virtuoso*, contemporary artist Gary Erbe pays tribute to both late 19th-century American trompe l'oeil paintings and the early Cubist works of Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso. Those two artists themselves had incorporated a common trompe l'oeil motif in their still lifes—a violin hanging on a wall, often accompanied by bow and sheet music—but undercut any illusion of realism by layering different angles and perspectives to create their subjects. The Cubists then applied pasted or collaged paper to the canvas, adding a two-dimensional "real" element to their fictive spaces. Erbe brings things full circle and applies trompe l'oeil technique to

Cubist forebears’ artworks— the violin seemingly made of collaged wallpaper and sheet music on cardboard is in fact a flat, painted surface.