
ADAMS EXPRESS

23: John Haberle *Torn in Transit* (1888–89)
John Frederick Peto *Articles Hung on a Door* (after 1890)

Marjorie B. Searl

We humans have long enjoyed being astonished by the experience of illusion, by being "taken in" by the appearance of a reality that isn't real. The most sophisticated connoisseur intent on brushing the lifelike fly or ant off the surface of a painting has gasped, at first with disbelief and then with delight, upon realizing that the creature is composed of strokes of paint. Legends about the virtuosity of artists like the ancient Greek painters Parrhasios and Zeuxis, who rivaled each other's ability to deceive, have been handed down through the generations.[1]

The "true modern Parrhasios," late nineteenth-century painter William Harnett, set the standard for his nineteenth-century American peers for hyperillusionistic painting, a style often referred to after 1800 as "trompe l'oeil," French for "fool the eye."[2] Harnett studied in Philadelphia and then traveled to Europe in the early 1880s, where he could see a variety of painting styles and subjects. Later in the decade, his celebrated work *After the Hunt*, most likely painted in Germany, hung in Theodore Stewart's Warren Street Saloon in Lower Manhattan, attracting visitors who came as much to see the painting as to drink. Much of the entertainment was generated by out-of-towners duped into placing a wager on whether or not the objects in the painting were real.[3] While interest in this type of mimetic work declined as the influence of abstraction increased, in 1940, an exhibition called Nature-Vivre at Edith Halpert's Downtown Gallery, encouraged its reexamination by *San Francisco Chronicle* art critic Alfred Frankenstein with unexpected results.[4] Frankenstein became interested in Harnett's work and decided to track it down; in the process, he revived the reputations of several of Harnett's contemporaries. While works by Harnett are not represented in the Memorial Art Gallery's collection, at least four MAG painters were indebted to him for their inspiration, and it's nearly impossible to consider them without understanding his impact on American art history.

Richard LaBarre Goodwin, 1840–1910
A Brace of Ducks, 1885
Oil on canvas, 30 x 25 in.
Marion Stratton Gould Fund, 64.39

While American artists worked in the still-life tradition and included still-life details as early as John Singleton Copley's pre-Revolutionary portraits, trompe l'oeil painting, a subset of still life, did not appear to flourish until the 1850s. Often, the work is composed in such a way that the canvas or panel itself appears to be the backdrop for one or more objects, and the eye, rather than being drawn toward the back of the painting, is only permitted to scan the details on the surface. Richard LaBarre Goodwin, for example, followed the tradition of Arthur Fitzwilliam Tait's 1850s game paintings with *A Brace of Ducks* (1885).[5] Goodwin's ducks hang heavily on a nail against a plain background where the cast shadows cause the objects to appear to project into the viewer's space. After 1885, presumably influenced by Harnett and paintings like *After the Hunt*, Goodwin's work became more complex.

(Facing page)
John Haberle, 1856–1933
Torn in Transit, 1888–89
Oil on canvas, 14 x 12⅛ in.
Marion Stratton Gould Fund, 65.6

Goodwin was but one of Frankenstein's "finds" on the trail of Harnett.[6] Another was John Haberle, an inventive trickster who understood that part of the success of a trompe l'oeil painting depended on its ability to activate the impulse to touch it. MAG's *Torn in Transit*, one of three similar works by Haberle, is so tempting that curators keep a Plexiglas lid between the painting and the public.[7] At first glance, we are not seeing a painting at all, but a package whose wrapper has been torn open to expose the contents, a

cracked board onto which a dreamy European canal scene is tacked, with a carte-de-visite of an oddly masculine-looking woman tucked in behind the painting of the painting.[8] The wrapping extends the illusion by being painted around all sides of the stretched canvas, as if it really were a package. Haberle signs his name "From Haberle," as if he were the sender. And, to make matters more questionable, the carte-de-visite has the appropriate thickness, and the string that is "tied" around the package invites the viewer to pluck it to determine whether it is real or not—hence the Plexiglas cover.

Most significantly, Frankenstein was able to identify John Frederick Peto through his census of Harnett paintings. Peto was a great admirer of Harnett, and for many years, his work was considered to be Harnett's, with forged signatures and all. Frankenstein was led to Peto's daughter's home, originally Peto's studio, as part of his sleuthing to learn more about Harnett, and found there a body of work that surprised and excited him.[9] Because Peto had been trained as a painter his work was indeed "softer," more painterly than that of Harnett and Haberle, who were originally engravers. Frankenstein now realized that the paintings he had categorized as using Harnett's "soft" technique, most of which were unsigned and undated, were actually by John Peto.[10] Her father, Helen Peto Smiley told Frankenstein, had "spoken of [Harnett] constantly–Harnett had, in fact, been Peto's ideal of perfection in still life painting." She went on to say that the two "had known each other as young men in Philadelphia but had lost contact after [Peto] had come to Island Heights in the 1880's."[11] Both had attended the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia, and had exhibited in the same venues, but Harnett's work alone was acclaimed. After he moved to Island Heights, New Jersey, in 1889, Peto was largely forgotten in the larger world, but his admiration for Harnett clearly did not abate.

William Michael Harnett, 1848–1892
After the Hunt, 1885
Oil on canvas, 71½ x 48½ in.
Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Mildred Anna Williams Collection, 1940.93

Of the four paintings considered in this essay, *Articles Hung on a Door* is the one that may be the least comprehensible to the contemporary viewer, separated by over a century from the objects depicted by Peto. It is one of a number of similar paintings by Peto done after 1889, when he moved to Island Heights. Founded by the Island Heights Camp Meeting Association, the community was a site for religious revivals, like other established gatherings organized with spiritual intent, including Oak Bluffs in Martha's Vineyard and Chautauqua Institution in Chautauqua, New York. Peto originally went to Island Heights after his marriage to earn income by playing the cornet, and subsequently became a song leader there. He had a photography studio, but continued painting, and was known to have bartered his canvases and art instruction for daily needs.[12] Both he and his buyers grew up in houses filled with the objects that he depicted hanging from realistic painted nails on weatherbeaten doors or tucked behind painted straps on a painted board. Twenty or thirty years after the Civil War, these were memorabilia that might have been found on attic shelves or in grandparents' trunks. When Frankenstein visited Helen Peto Smiley at her father's former studio, many of the objects in the paintings were still lying around.

Around the edges of the layered group in *Articles Hung on a Door* we find a horseshoe (the ubiquitous symbol of luck), a small dog-eared pamphlet, a still-life sketch held up with tacks, the remnants of other papers that have been carelessly torn, and various pieces of hardware. But it is the central group that pulls the viewer in and begs, for the sake of our postmodern brain, for explication, because until we actually understand the functions of the original objects, we can only speculate about the painting's interpretation. Because space between the door and the viewer is so compressed, the first challenge is to determine the sequence of objects in the layering.

(Facing page)
John Frederick Peto, 1854–1907
Articles Hung on a Door, after 1890
Oil on canvas, 30 x 21¾ in.
Marion Stratton Gould Fund, 65.3

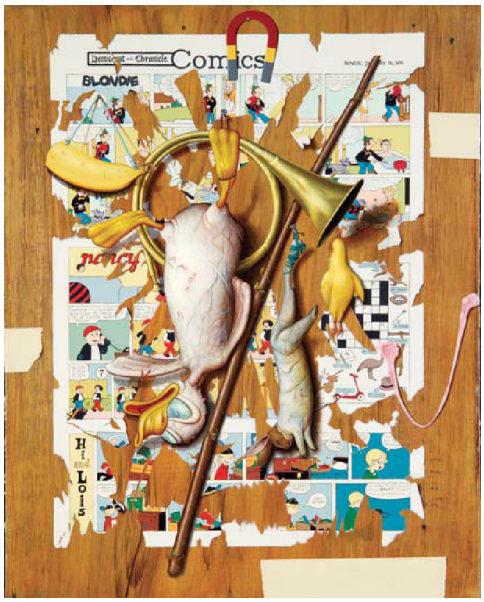
Working from the door out, the first object is the bag, which is hanging by its leather strap. The odd arrangement of a bag within a bag has been explained by contemporary craftsman Ken Scott, who identified it as a Pennsylvania German game bag, made by German immigrants from the early 1700s through the late 1800s. The flap was made of deerskin with the hair left on. The soft, fringed pouch carried the quarry—squirrels,

rabbits, or birds—and the leather bag stored tools and supplies for the rifle or fowler gun.[13] Hanging from the bag, in a way that is not entirely clear, is a metal powder flask that held gunpowder for loading into a musket to shoot a lead ball. Such flasks were produced as early as the 1820s and 30s, often decorated with embossed designs like the fleur-de-lis on this one; a nearly identical one was found in Peto's studio.[14] The canteen might have been used by a Civil War soldier; the bugle, as well, is a military accoutrement. Hanging from the bugle is a powder horn, which, like the powder flask, was a component of a hunter or soldier's weaponry. The final item hanging on this sturdy nail is an early nineteenth-century pistol, most likely a flintlock that was in common use during the Civil War.[15]

At first glance, the assortment of objects hanging from this single nail seems completely random and disorganized. In the words of a young man who examined this painting recently, the objects are "pieces of oldness." But as we look, we begin to see what the significance of the individual objects mean and the way they inform the broader meaning of the painting. Even in the late nineteenth century, these objects would have been understood as being from a period that had passed. All are old; some seem broken or out of use. The door itself—with repairs, missing hardware, layers of paint—is deeply weathered. The canteen lacks a stopper, the powder flask is suspended in no obvious way, and the pistol is a relic of another age.

And so, after regarding the individual objects, gaining some understanding of their history and function and mentally reuniting them, we elicit an overriding, somber message about age, incompleteness, and perhaps irrelevance. Peto has taken Harnett's beautiful, burnished, and elegant objects and replaced them with tokens of obsolescence. "Peto's still lifes," say scholars William H. Gerdts and Russell Burke, "are the most powerful reflection of post-Civil War pessimism in American still life."[16] Certainly, one can almost hear the elegiac "Taps" drifting out of the bugle, perhaps Peto's sad song for himself. The palette, off to the side, tucked behind the primary assemblage, hangs on its one nail, physically separate but visually integrated. This self-referential detail, possibly a stand-in for the artist, may be a commentary on the tension between the reflective life of the artist and the active experience suggested by accoutrements of the sporting life.

Kathy Calderwood,
1946–
After Harnett, 1976
Acrylic on masonite panel,
20 x 16 in.
Marion Stratton Gould Fund,
76.14
©1976 Kathy Calderwood



Contemporary artists continue to dwell in the in-between space where illusion and reality overlap. Kathy Calderwood's *After Harnett* takes a trompe l'oeil poke at contemporary American culture using the comic character Donald Duck as the dead bird hanging in front of a plywood board covered with remnants of the Sunday comics. A rabbit, three of whose feet have already vanished into good luck charms, hangs to Donald's right, and half a banana mocks the shape of the standard powder horn. Instead of a horseshoe there is a child's magnet. Pink bubble gum and masking tape provide the finishing sticky touches. We contemporary viewers understand Calderwood's work because of an instant familiarity with its pop culture references. By the same token, the nineteenth-century viewer would have had a greater affinity with *Articles Hanging on a Door*. We can still get a jolt of immediate pleasure from trompe l'oeil created in another era, but we have to work a little harder to unpack a deeper meaning.

Are we hard-wired to enjoy these small moments of deception? Do we marvel at an artist's skill? Yes, and more. Our enjoyment goes much deeper when we understand what we are seeing. The trick is but the first step, and if it is successful, it should move us to consider the rest for its insight into the hearts and minds of another time.

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