Painting Ephemera in the Age of Mass Production: American Trompe l'Oeil Painting and Visual Culture in the Late Nineteenth Century

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American Trompe l’Oeil Painting and Visual Culture in the Late Nineteenth Century

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Katherine Brunk Harnish

Washington University in St. Louis
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To my dearest, Edwin.
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Painting Ephemera in the Age of Mass Production:
American Trompe l’Oeil Painting and Visual Culture in the Late Nineteenth Century

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This study offers a fresh approach to investigating the modernization of visual media, exploring themes of media translation, appropriation, and the fine art and popular art divide. This dissertation focuses on paintings that represent prints and photographs in order to understand the relationships between all three media—relationships that changed drastically in late nineteenth-century America. William Harnett, John Haberle, and John Peto made many trompe l’oeil paintings that depict photographs, newspaper clippings, trade cards, and other ephemera. This project posits that these artists represented new media strategically to attract viewers well versed in these forms and to assert the continued relevance of painting. The tensions among these media crystalize broader cultural anxieties around modernization—about cultural legacy, class distinctions, the rapid pace of life, and consumerism’s intrusion into cultural values.
Chapter 1: American Trompe l’Oeil Painting and the Iconology of Popular Visual Media

Unpacking *A Bachelor’s Drawer*

In the late nineteenth century, several American painters conspicuously and consistently featured paper ephemera in their compositions. *A Bachelor’s Drawer*, which John Haberle (1856-1933) completed in 1894, portrays an exuberant array of this subject matter (figure 1.1).¹ The painting depicts see a battered wooden drawer front. There are holes where missing handles once were and bent nails appearing to protrude from the seam between the main panel and the molding. In the upper left corner, apparently carved into the wood, we see the artist’s signature: HABERLE ’89-94. Although the drawer is probably no longer useful as a container for objects, the titular bachelor owner seems to have made do by gluing and nailing an assortment of mostly paper objects onto the front.

Pasted onto the drawer front, just left of center, we see ragged and written-on paper currency of different denominations and from different eras: colonial, Confederate, and United States (figure 1.2). Right below the keyhole in the center is a make-shift pocket composed of a cigar box lid (figure 1.3). There are little leather tabs for hinges connecting it to the drawer at the bottom and a ribbon holding it shut at the top. The cigar box lid itself features several pasted labels and stamps indicating that it was imported. Many small items jut out from within the lid-pocket: a small glass vile, a post-marked and stained envelope, a paper tag with a string and a tassel, a comb with a few broken teeth, a corn-cob pipe, a shoe lace, a corkscrew, and a button

hook. Right below the lid-pocket, there are a few newspaper clippings—some very tattered, but all with legible words that refer to the deceptiveness of illusionistic painting (figure 1.4). Further to the right, we see a fairly large chromolithograph illustration of a dandy with an enormous mustache, a monocle, and a daintily held cigar (figure 1.5). The chromo seems to have been used at some point as scrap paper to figure out a math problem. A booklet with a chromolithographed cover overlaps the dandy and is seemingly the object of his scowling gaze. The brightly covered booklet is titled *How to Name the Baby*. It features a somewhat uncertain looking toddler with white-blond hair and rosy cheeks. The cover also has a couple of toys that seem to project forward illusionistically from the cover. Someone plunged a threaded sewing needle into the “A” of “Baby.” There is a small thermometer next to the booklet, showing a pleasant 72 degrees Fahrenheit. Along the bottom of the drawer front, we see a few canceled stamps pasted to the board. Haberle painted objects at the very edges of the canvas, anticipating how they would appear to interact with the frame of the painting (figure 1.6-1.7). A slew of ticket stubs, a tintype photograph of Haberle, a cigarette trade card of a crow, a prayer card, and a pocket knife all appear to be wedged into the gap between the drawer and the frame along the bottom edge. There are some matches sticking out from behind the crow card. Two playing cards—a king of spades and a nine of hearts—seem to be tucked into the right-side frame. Several other items look like they are resting on the painting’s frame along the bottom: a hair pin, a copper coin, and a cigarette butt. The drawer front also features a cabinet card photograph of a nude woman and four cigarette photographs—small-scale photographs that came in packages of cigarettes (figure 1.8). On the cigarette cards, we see a squalling baby and showgirls. All in all, it is an ungainly inventory.
The illusionism of the painting is startling. From the wood of the drawer itself to all the objects placed upon it, everything is precisely observed and described. The almost glowing appearance of the varnished wood, the light glinting off the metal around the key hole, the slight shadow behind the glass spectacles, the creases and tears in the paper of the chromo dandy, the modeling of the corn-cob pipe stem, the printed flourishes on the currency and labels—there is an extraordinary level of detail. To stand before the painting is an intense optical and almost somatic experience that photographic reproductions of it cannot replicate. The painting has a palpability and an almost magnetic immediacy. It demands a closer look.

Haberle, like several other American painters working concurrently, was a trompe l’oeil artist. The theoretical gambit of trompe l’oeil painting is to convince the painting’s viewers that they are seeing a group of objects rather than a painting of objects. The way that Haberle plays with the frame of the painting, however, implies a more subtle question. Because he positioned his subject matter to appear to interact with the actual frame of the painting, he seems to anticipate that the viewers will approach the work as a framed piece of art. The painting invites viewers to figure out if *A Bachelor’s Drawer* is really an illusionistic painting or if it is actually a collage, posing as painting—a kind of ‘fake’ art. At a distance, it is not difficult to imagine that some of the objects might be pasted to the canvas rather than painted: as the words of one of the printed newspaper clippings suggests, “‘Fake’ pictures, in which actual bank notes, etc., were skilfully [sic] pasted on canvas and covered first with a wash of bitumen, and then glass, were denounced as pitiful frauds, but […]”\(^2\) If viewers were close enough to the painting to read the

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\(^2\) While this clipping does not seem to be quoting any of the surviving printed reviews of Haberle’s painting, it clearly references the controversial reception of one of his early paintings *U.S.A.*, ca. 1889. It was on display at the Chicago Art Institute, and a local paper, the Chicago *Inter-Ocean* published a review claiming that the painting was not a painting, but rather distressed paper currency pasted to a board and varnished. What then followed was a “scientific” investigation of the painting which seems to have amounted to looking at it under a microscope and dissolving some of the paint to get down to canvas. Several newspapers followed this event and the *Inter-Ocean*
clipping, they would also be close enough to notice the flatness of the surface of the canvas as well as the canvas weave, which contradict the illusion of layered scraps and modeled wood. Viewers must conclude that this is a painting in its entirety, with an ordinary frame. If not always quite ‘eye fooling,’ Haberle’s paintings are consistently eye-catching; they invite viewers to look closer and question their assumptions about what painting is and can be.

*A Bachelor’s Drawer* is a painting about coping with change. The motley assortment of ephemera, appended to a drawer that can no longer be opened, suggests the dissipated life of a single man who must contend with the impending implications of starting a family. Most of the ephemera act as souvenirs from nights out on the town, gambling, smoking, and going to shows. He was free to travel and to enjoy pictures of—and perhaps also the company of—showgirls. The one cigarette card of the wailing baby and the baby-naming pamphlet indicate that this long-time bachelor will soon become a father. This looming change lends a nostalgic quality to the man’s jumbled keepsakes of his bachelorhood.

In a broader sense, the painting registers the sweeping societal changes of urbanization and industrialization that would render the urban bachelor a recognizable type. The last quarter of the nineteenth century witnessed vast cultural shifts that accompanied and fueled modernization.3 In dialectical fashion, the technological and social aspects of modernization printed a retraction to the earlier claims of fraud. The critic for the *Inter-Ocean* explained that he had encountered ‘fake’ paintings that were actually collages, and so that predisposed him to assume Haberle’s painting was the same kind of thing. Sill reproduces these articles in *John Haberle*, 25–29. For more on John Haberle's inclusion of self-referential and possible altered newspaper clippings in his paintings, see Jennifer A. Greenhill, *Playing It Straight: Art and Humor in the Gilded Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 148-155.

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supported and shaped each other. New social norms, values, traditions, entertainments, and aesthetics evolved alongside industrialization and urbanization. The reactions to the changes brought by modernization were uneven and ambivalent, as residual patterns of thought and attitude persisted alongside changing dominant and emergent elements.¹

The juxtaposition of the rustic corn cob pipe and the more cosmopolitan cigar box lid—as well as the cigarette cards and cigarette butt—suggests that the titular bachelor may have been one of the many people with rural roots who moved to the city during this era. The population distribution shifted from predominantly rural to urban, and the nature of work for more people switched from agrarian to manufacturing. Cities bustled with people, strangers who increasingly relied on external signs like clothing, grooming, accessories, and mannerisms to make judgements about each other’s characters and social status, since family and reputation were likely unknown. Gender and family dynamics altered, as did the boundaries between public and private life.² In the painting, we see a reference to the prevalence of stereotyping in the chromo of the dandy, as well as to changing norms of masculinity. Such an illustration prompted people to find humor in both the likeness and exaggeration of costume, posture, and hairstyles, which all indicated a certain lifestyle of idleness and self-absorption.


The accumulation of ticket stubs along the bottom of the painting is a testament to the greater accessibility of the performing arts in cities, places where the higher concentration of people meant that ticket sales could support more venues and artists. We can imagine the bachelor character finding a reprieve from the isolation and anonymity of city life in a crowded theater. Through theater, music, and perhaps more erotic entertainments, the man might feel a temporary sense of community, united superficially with the audience in the group experience. The matching orange tickets closest to the front indicate the bachelor attended with a friend or a date; this contrasts all the other single tickets tucked behind the pair, suggesting a much longer period of solo activity.

Among the other tickets, behind the pocket knife, we see a lavender steamship ticket for the “Ocean S.” The bachelor lived in a time of unparalleled speed and ease of travel thanks to the steam engine in both ships and trains. Not only was travel faster and more common, but trade and communication also reached farther and faster. The post and periodicals now traveled by trains and steamships as well, and news also traveled by telegraph. America was both more intra- and interconnected than ever before. The sailboat we see on one of the cigar box lid labels provides a reminder of the not so distant pre-steam power past. New technological increases in speed of transportation and communication responded to and fueled peoples’ expectations, desires, and anxieties. Machine power also radically transformed manufacturing, where the newfound capabilities to produce items with efficiency and uniformity not only changed the marketplace but shoppers’ perceptions of what constituted desirable and high quality goods.

The contents of the little scraps of paper, the prints, and the photographs plastering the drawer front—these remnants of print and visual culture—allude to many of these larger societal changes. Printed tickets, postal stamps, advertisements, and illustrations: items like these
facilitated, documented, and interpreted the new ways of life. At the same time, print and visual culture were also constantly changing.

In *A Bachelor’s Drawer*, the abundance and variety of printed and photographic subject matter represent both the technological changes in visual culture and the shifts in how people engaged with, understood, and valued it. We see multiple types of print and photographic processes coexisting in a jumbled, heterogeneous plane: steel-engraved labels and paper currency, chromolithographic cards and illustrations, newsprint, albumen photographs, and a tintype. This is just a small sampling of the wider burgeoning visual culture, which also included wood engraving, different forms of etchings, and photomechanical processes. By the time this painting was finished in 1894, pre-loaded snapshot cameras had made amateur photography increasingly widespread. Many of the new image-making processes produced multiple identical images from single photographic negatives or print matrices; their efficiency and uniformity


aligned these processes with manufacturing. The changes in paper formulation and production supported this diversification and multiplication of forms. Nearly everyone could afford a copy of the newspaper and likely had a choice among multiple publications. Photographic and print technologies made individual images far cheaper and more accessible to buyers than oil paintings. Collecting and living with images was no longer a luxury reserved for the upper classes.

However, these new visual media were not free from social class associations. For example, while proponents of chromolithography lauded this technology for making reproductions of fine art affordable for middle-class patrons, critics argued that it debased rather than democratized fine art—ostensibly because of the discrepancies between copy and original.

8 Daguerreotypes, the earliest popularized type of photography, was a direct process that produced only one photograph from one exposure. This was the main type of photography practiced in the US through the early 1850s. In the 1830s, Englishman Henry Fox Talbot invented a process for making salt prints, or calotypes, using negatives from which multiple positive prints could be made. He kept the process tightly controlled under copyright, but the formula was secreted into France in the late 1840s and became more widespread in the 1850s. By the 1860s, using negatives to make albumen prints became the predominant photographic method in the US, especially for the vastly popular carte-de-visite picture format. Tintypes, or ferrotypes, were invented in the 1850s and remained in use through the early 20th century. They use a wet collodion photograph process. Like daguerreotypes, tintypes have no intervening negative, so each picture is the direct result of an individual camera exposure.


10 T. S. Arthur, writing as early as 1849, talks about how recently photographs and portraits had become attainable to most everyone. He writes, “A few years ago it was not every man who could afford a likeness of himself, his wife or his children; these were luxuries known to those only who had money to spare; now it is hard to find the man who has not gone through the ‘operator’s’ hands from once to half-a-dozen times, or who has not the shadowy faces of his wife and children done up in purple morocco and velvet, together or singly, among his household treasures.” See Arthur, “American Characteristics,” Godey’s Lady’s Book 38 (May 1849). Reproduced in Sarah Burns and John Davis, eds. American Art to 1900: A Documentary History (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 392–94. On the impact of chromolithography in making full-color images available to the masses, see Peter C. Marzio, The Democratic Art: Pictures for a 19th-Century America: Chromolithography, 1840-1900 (Boston: Fort Worth: D.R. Godine; Amon Carter Museum of Western Art, 1979), 1-22.
Ultimately, chromolithographs became associated with middle class taste more broadly, as well as the myriad changes in society that accompanied the growing predominance of the middle class. Viewers of A Bachelor’s Drawer from nearly every walk of life would have enough cumulative experience with popular visual culture to understand the functions and cultural associations of each item in the painting; they would have been able to draw some conclusions about the bachelor’s status, values, and lifestyle from the media, formats, and contents of the objects.

A Bachelor’s Drawer is about changes in a man’s personal life, in visual culture, and in American society even more broadly. It is also about changes in painting as an artistic medium. By representing print and photographic media with such precision and care, it upended the traditional relationship between fine and popular art media. Haberle challenged the norms of what painting could be about, who it could address, and by what means.

Why paint these printed and photographic pieces of ephemera? The worn and shabby appearances of some of the items speak to both their lack of durability and the lack of care with which they were handled. Many of these items seem disposable, replaceable, commonplace. However, their ubiquity and accessibility could also be a source of power. People had direct, physical relationships with these objects. A chromo card or studio photograph fit easily in a hand and might also change hands. They could be souvenirs of social events and private epiphanies. Photographs seemed to have a corner on visual truth, and prints, in the form of illustrations or

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11 See Michael Clapper “‘I Was Once a Barefoot Boy!’: Cultural Tensions in a Popular Chromo,” American Art 16, no. 2 (2002): 16–39. Clapper concisely evokes the controversy around chromolithography with his article focused on a single popular chromolithograph. Edwin Godkin was the leading critic of chromolithography. For a characteristically searing critique of the form, see Godkin, “Fine Arts: Autotypes and Oleographs,” reproduced in Burns and Davis, eds., American Art to 1900, 898–900. This essay was originally published in the Nation, on November 10, 1870. On the association of chromos with broader changes in American culture, see Godkin’s essay “Chromo-Civilization,” Nation, September 24, 1874, also reproduced in Burns and Davis, eds., American Art to 1900, 900-901. For fervent praise of chromolithography, see any issue of the short-lived Prang’s Chromo, which Louis Prang’s company printed in the years 1868-1870.
advertisements, could reflect cultural expectations and introduce desires. Such objects could communicate and connect with people in ways that were typically unavailable to painting.

*A Bachelor’s Drawer* was not Haberle’s only painting to take on this iconography in such an illusionistic way, and neither was Haberle the only painter to do so. During the late nineteenth century, Haberle was one of several American painters working in a trompe l’oeil style and depicting the reproductive arts—i.e. photographs and prints. William Harnett (1848-1892) was the first to receive notice for his highly illusionistic way of painting in the mid 1870s. John Peto (1854-1907) was another prolific painter of highly illusionistic still life compositions, many of which featured print and photographic subject matter. During the 1880s and 1890s, these three painters produced many artworks that take as subject the changes in their visual culture and how people engaged with it.\footnote{Alfred Frankenstein first distinguished the painting styles and compositional tendencies of the three major trompe l’oeil painters of the era. He pieced together artist biographies, information on training and influences, as well as contemporary reception from the limited remaining documentation on these three artists and also for artists working in a similar style in the same era in what he terms the second and third circle. See Frankenstein, *After the Hunt: William Harnett and Other American Still Life Painters, 1870-1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953), revised in 1969. All subsequent citations of this source will refer to the 1969 edition unless otherwise specified. For an expansion upon Frankenstein’s work, with a wealth of short essays on different aspects of Harnett’s career and artwork, see Doreen Bolger, Marc Simpson, and John Wilmerding, eds., *William M. Harnett* (Fort Worth: New York: Amon Carter Museum; Metropolitan Museum of Art; H.N. Abrams, 1992). On John Haberle, see Gertrude Grace Sill, *John Haberle, Master of Illusion* (Springfield, MA: Museum of Fine Arts, 1985); and Sill, *John Haberle: American Master of Illusion*. On John Peto, see John Wilmerding, *Important Information Inside: The Art of John F. Peto and the Idea of Still-Life Painting in Nineteenth-Century America* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1983); Doreen Bolger “The Early Rack Paintings of John F. Peto: ‘Beneath the Nose of the Whole World,'” in *The Object as Subject: Studies in the Interpretation of Still Life*, ed. Anne W. Lowenthal (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 58–81.}

An essential point of departure for this study is the recognition that late nineteenth-century American trompe l’oeil paintings frequently depict other visual media. Through historical contextualization of this iconography, I offer a new interpretation of these paintings. The works of Haberle, Harnett, Peto, and others reveal, I argue, a new perspective on the shifting relationships among painting, print, and photography during this important era of American...
modernization. It is through their representation and manipulation of those relationships that they attempted to position painting as persistently valuable.

The paintings do more than document the changes in visual technology. While they often represent real-world objects, their subjective commentary emerges from the artists’ selection, arrangement, and subtle modifications of the subject matter. They strategically contextualized and mediated prints and photographs in their paintings. I argue that these artists represented new media not only to attract an audience excited by and well versed in these forms, but also to assert the continued power and relevance of painting. The paintings present implicit comparisons between represented and representing media, highlighting similarities and differences in the interconnected categories of aesthetics, physical properties, functions, and cultural status. As we have seen in A Bachelor’s Drawer, the representations of printed and photographic items indicate a deep engagement not only with the modernization of image-making technology, but also with the inextricable issues and pressures of societal modernization in the larger sense. I argue that the tensions among these media crystalize broader cultural anxieties around modernization—about cultural legacy, class distinctions, the rapid pace of life, and consumerism’s intrusion into cultural values.

American art historians have typically focused on Tonalism as the movement in painting linked with the broader intellectual and social changes of modernization during this era.\(^{13}\) Tonalism responded to the growing concern about the perils of modern life—pitting scenes of repose rendered in soothing color harmonies against the increasingly rapid pace of production and transportation, crowding streets, and overstimulation of the senses believed to lead to

nervousness or neurasthenia. It countered the mimetic powers of the camera and press with a move towards a more abstract mode of representation, with greater interest in the expressive and emotive uses of color, and with looser, more gestural brushwork.

The trompe l’oeil paintings of this era register and respond to these same cultural issues but in divergent ways, as this dissertation explores. This study seeks to reposition trompe l’oeil painting as a significant response to American modernization, as part of a range of revealing responses.

**Historiography**

Twentieth and twenty-first century art historians typically refer to Haberle, Harnett, and Peto as trompe l’oeil painters, from the French for *fool the eye*. This study will use the same nomenclature. Many but not all of their paintings conform to the strictures of this style. Trompe l’oeil painting follows certain rules. As the initial goal is to appear convincingly like real life,

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15 For American Tonalist painting, see Marc Simpson and Wanda M. Corn, *Like Breath on Glass: Whistler, Inness, and the Art of Painting Softly* (Williamstown, MA: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute; New Haven, 2008). For an investigation on the way American culture more broadly responded to the mimetic powers of photography, see Miles Orvell, *The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989). Orvell characterizes the shift between American Victorian and modern sensibilities as a change in response to the capacities of machines to imitate or represent external reality, a shift from celebrating imitation and vicarious experience or ownership to desiring unique, non-referent based, objects and experiences—which Orvell terms *authentic*. See Orvell, pp. 73-102 and 198.

16 According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the phrase was first use in an English language publication in 1889. Harnett, Peto, and Haberle were historically referred to as imitative or realistic still life painters. The one exception I have encountered is a reference to one of Haberle’s paintings, *Imitation*, 1887, while it was on display at the National Academy. The author refers to the painting as “trompe l’oil [sic].” See the *New York Evening Post*, November 19, 1887, quoted in Sill, *John Haberle: American Master of Illusion*, 15-16.

17 Peto’s paintings often use the same compositional conventions as trompe l’oeil painting, but his slightly looser brushwork typically makes it immediately clear that most, if not all, of the objects he has painted are indeed representations. Nonetheless, journal articles from Peto’s lifetime discuss his work as if it were truly eye-fooling.

the depicted subject matter must be life-size. It must also be plausible that the objects would remain still for some time. For this reason, trompe l’oeil is often associated with the genre of still life painting. This makes sense because if the subject matter were living, the absence of movement and sound would too quickly shatter the illusion. Trompe l’oeil paintings can either create the illusion of spatial depth or projection. The most successful typically appear to come forward slightly off the surface of the support, seeming to project into the viewer’s space. If the represented objects are flat, like a card or shallow frame, viewers’ binocular vision will not so readily reveal the true depth. The painting will appear correct from multiple viewer positions, unlike a depiction of recessive space that relies on one-point perspective.

The earliest published accounts of these artworks from the years in which they were made tended to describe the contents of the paintings and then discuss their power to fool the audience through illusionism. Some authors went on to state their opinions about if this was or was not the purview of fine art.

psychologically, we find trompe l’oeil effects convincing, see Wolf Singer, “The Misperception of Reality,” in Deceptions and Illusions, by Ebert-Schifferer, 40–51.


20 There are some notable exceptions in which the artist includes human figures, such as Charles Willson Peale’s The Staircase Group, 1795—a portrait of Peale’s son’s climbing a staircase that seems continuous with the viewer’s space. For another American example, see John Neagle’s The Studious Artist (1836), a self-portrait in which the artist jauntily appears to be leaning on the painting’s frame. In both of these examples, the chief success in fooling viewers is in creating confusion with the frame about where exactly the painting stops and the viewer’s space begins.


To what extent were these paintings truly deceptive, and why were they so popular in this particular time and place? These questions have fueled much of the scholarship on trompe l’oeil painting. Sybille Ebert-Schifferer describes the way writers have historically reacted to trompe l'oeil painting as if they were fooled by its illusion as a literary trope with a deep history.\(^{23}\) James Cook, Paul Staiti, and Michael Leja have argued convincingly that the extreme illusionism of these paintings served an important culturally specific function. In the age of Barnum’s famous humbugs, concerns about counterfeiting, dubious advertising ploys, and con men, trompe l’oeil paintings challenged viewers to detect the trick and feel pride in doing so—honoring a visual skill to tell truth from falsehood, which would serve them in the wider world, particularly in the urban setting.\(^{24}\) While Cook and Staiti do not question the gullibility of the audience, Leja argues that the audience was semi-knowing of the deception and enjoyed the game of figuring it out.\(^{25}\) Haberle’s *A Bachelor’s Drawer* overtly signals to its viewers that there is some deception at work, be it that the objects are fake or that the painting is real. Certainly this supports Leja’s interpretation of the historical reception. Leja draws on Neil Harris’s work on the reception of Barnum’s many hoaxes in the antebellum period.\(^{26}\) Harris developed the idea of an operational aesthetic, or an appreciation of the challenge of figuring out how an effect was produced. The

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Peto’s work, see the Archives of American Art. See John Frederick Peto and Peto family papers, circa 1850-1983. Series 3: Printed Material, 1880-1983 (Box 1, OV 5; 11 folders). Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Many of these clippings do not identify the newspaper or date of the clipping.


more steeped in the world of mechanical labor and technological innovations, the more power this aesthetic seemed to hold for viewers. Further, Harris notes, evaluating an artifact of art or culture based on this aesthetic principle relieved viewers from the burden of having to consider matters of taste, beauty, and moral impact. The operational aesthetic does not fully capture how historical viewers understood trompe l’oeil paintings, however, because figuring out that they are painted did not mark the end of viewer engagement.

Through my analysis of the paintings, the objects they portray, and their historical reception, I have found strong evidence that the illusionism serves another function not identified in the current literature: to invite the viewer to pay special attention to the material quality of the oil paint medium and the significance of the subject matter it depicts.

The early- to mid-twentieth century scholarship on these paintings largely ignored subject matter. In the 1930s, Edith Gregor Halpert (1900-1970) reintroduced late nineteenth century American trompe l’oeil painting as an important antecedent to contemporary vanguard art world trends. Halpert ran the influential Downtown Gallery in New York City, which specialized in showing art by contemporary American artists and by American folk artists of the previous century. In 1939, the Downtown Gallery created an exhibition “Nature-Vivre’ by William Harnett” which traveled around the country and received significant interest and praise. Guided by Halpert’s exhibition text, sophisticated viewers at the time saw connections to Precisionism,

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27 For a representative retrospective exhibition of the works that were shown at the Downtown Gallery, see University of Connecticut, ed., Edith Halpert and the Downtown Gallery: Exhibition (Storrs, CT, 1968). For a biography of Halpert, see Lindsay Pollock, The Girl with the Gallery: Edith Gregor Halpert and the Making of the Modern Art Market (New York: Public Affairs, 2006), see 214-217 on Halpert’s discovery of Harnett and the ‘Nature Vivre’ show.

Cubism, and Surrealism. “We marvel at the fact that he [Harnett] anticipated a style practiced today by the vanguard in France and in this country. His color is brilliant, the painting flawless, and the composition organized in abstract pattern. But it is Harnett’s combination of meticulous realism with an arbitrary juxtaposition of unrelated objects that may be said to provide the link between Dutch art of the seventeenth century and surrealism of the twentieth.”

This insistence that the objects are random rather than meaningful seems to be an attempt to justify an interest in Harnett through contemporary fine art criteria, stressing aesthetic, formal, and conceptual considerations. Prominent museum directors such as Alfred Barr (MoMA) and Lloyd Goodrich (Whitney) became interested in Harnett, thinking of him as an ancestor of contemporary movements including surrealism and cubism. The Downtown Gallery hosted another major exhibition of Harnett’s work in 1948. The language of the exhibition catalogue reprises the description offered in the 1939 show: “Harnett’s paintings aroused the interest and admiration of the present generation not only because of his extraordinary technical mastery, but also for his imaginative grouping of unrelated objects in abstract patterns, similar to the most advanced directions in painting today.”

Alfred Frankenstein, whose publications on Harnett and other nineteenth century American trompe l’oeil artists dominated the literature of the 1940s-1960s, also paid little


32 The Downtown Gallery and Gardner, Harnett Centennial Exhibition.
attention to the significance of the subject matter. After initially encountering Harnett through the traveling “Nature Vivre” exhibition, he began researching Harnett in the mid 1940s. Over the course of several years, he discovered that some of the most celebrated “Harnett” paintings were actually works by John F. Peto. In Frankenstein’s quest to delineate who was who, he discovered copious previously unknown information about both painters, which fueled decades of publications on Harnett, Peto, and other trompe l’oeil artists. His many publications, while analytically light, are information dense. His research into the artists’ biographies and artwork provenance laid much of the groundwork for later scholarship. Frankenstein insisted that the subject matter of trompe l’oeil paintings has no symbolism, no deeper meaning, that it was chosen for its physical flatness to support more convincing trompe l’oeil illusions.

It was not until the late twentieth century that scholars began to pay serious attention to the subject matter of American trompe l’oeil paintings. David Lubin and Michael Leja both analyzed trompe l’oeil paintings’ subject matter through the lens of the commodity status and values of the depicted objects. Lubin argued that the worn appearance of much of the subject matter removes the objects from the realm of commodification. Leja countered that the tactile appeal of the worn objects aligned with the tactility of commercial display and suggested the

33 Frankenstein first wrote about Harnett when he reviewed the “Nature-Vivre” show when it traveled to the M. H. de Young Memorial Museum in 1940. Frankenstein, “The Strange Case of True Art and Counterfeit Money,” San Francisco Chronicle (April 21, 1940), 28.


pleasures of using and possessing these objects.\textsuperscript{36} I build upon their work by exploring how the objects in the paintings register more personal and social forms of worth in addition to the commodity value and how and why the paintings appropriated those values.

While Lubin and Leja address the whole range of subject matter in trompe l’oeil paintings, from dead game to musical instruments to bric-a-brac, my study specifically focuses on the depictions of prints and photographs, treating these media as subject matter. In 1974, Martin Battersby, writing about trompe l’oeil painting through multiple historical and cultural contexts, identified an iconography of paper. Battersby pointed out many instances of the depiction of books and newspaper, letters and photographs, though he did not go on to explore what their presence in this kind of painting might mean.\textsuperscript{37}

Subsequent scholars have fruitfully taken on the task of interpretation for individual types of paper-based subject matter, such as paper currency or newspapers. Several scholars have paid significant attention to the many paintings of paper currency, connecting them not only to period concerns about counterfeiting but also to debates about the gold standard.\textsuperscript{38} Laura A. Coyle explored the role of newspapers in Harnett’s paintings, examining how newspapers impacted

\begin{itemize}
  \item Lubin, \textit{Picturing a Nation}, 273-320; Leja, \textit{Looking Askance}, 125-152.
  \item Battersby, \textit{Trompe L’oeil}.
\end{itemize}
American daily life broadly, and Harnett’s life specifically. In an essay on Peto’s later rack paintings, John Wilmerding focused specifically on the iconography of portraits of Lincoln. Johanna Drucker considered a wide variety of paper-based ephemera in trompe l’oeil paintings as signaling an attitude she termed “proto-modernism,” anticipating the collage aesthetic of the early twentieth century. These studies have supported new interpretations of the paintings based largely on the content of their subject matter of focus. I synthesize and build upon these findings by exploring the interactions between the content and the media of the subject matter, by approaching the media of the reproductive arts as subject matter.

In Harnett’s, Haberle’s, and Peto’s work, many of the depictions of the reproductive arts show signs of deterioration—of ephemerality. In A Bachelor’s Drawer, we see the scraps of old paper currency, the creases and tears in the dandy chromo, and the bent corners of the photographic cards. The tattered state of objects in these paintings, paper and otherwise, has not gone unnoticed by scholars, particularly in Peto’s paintings. Scholars have explained the signs of wear and tear as expressing Peto’s personal feelings of despair. This tendency to psychologize Peto and his peers overlooks the broader societal explanations for portraying objects, and especially paper-based objects, in a state of deterioration as I argue in this dissertation. What, I


42 See, for instance, Frankenstein, The Reality of Appearance, 94-95. Wilmerding often alludes to Peto's personal distress in his interpretations of Peto's work. See, for example, his interpretation of Peto's Take Your Choice in Wilmerding, Important Information Inside, 130-131. See also Drucker's description of Peto's distinctively melancholic work, “Harnett, Haberle, and Peto,” 44-45.

43 Olaf Hansen wrote that the paper-based objects depicted in trompe l'oeil paintings serve memory functions, and that the signs of decay indicate the ultimate futility of the historian’s project in the face of time’s destructive powers.
ask, does painting such deteriorated paper-based objects reveal about the relationships between painting as a medium and the more popular graphic arts?

**History and Transmission of Trompe l’Oeil Painting**

Although trompe l’oeil painting well suited to late nineteenth-century American culture, it has deep roots in the history of Western art. A few examples and stories of deceptively mimetic painting reach back to antiquity. Pliny the Elder described a competition between painters Zeuxis and Parrhasios. Zeuxis painted grapes so convincingly that birds flew up to image in attempts to eat the fruit. Parrhasios then painted an image of a curtain with such illusionism that Zeuxis sought to move the curtain to reveal the painting it presumably covered. Zeuxis then declared that Parrhasios achieved the greatest success in fooling another artist, whereas he—Zeuxis—only deceived birds. Trompe l’oeil depictions of grapes or curtains in early modern and Baroque European painting allude to this account, signaling both the painter’s skill and erudition.

We see trompe l’oeil style deceptive illusionism in the Italian quattrocento with Giotto’s use of this style of painting to create the appearance of relief sculptures and architectural details

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Hansen’s comments hold the weight of insightful yet casual philosophical observation, as he does not tether them to specific historical issues emerging out of the social and technological context as I aim to do. See Hansen, “The Senses of Illusion,” in *American Icons: Transatlantic Perspectives on Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century American Art*, ed. Thomas W Gaehgtens and Heinz Ickstadt (Santa Monica, Calif.; Chicago: Getty Center for the History of Art and Humanities: Distributed by the University of Chicago Press], 1992), 267–86.

in his Arena Chapel fresco (figure 1.9). The style most fully flourished in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Dutch and Flemish painting, along with the rise in popularity of the still life genre. In a highly sophisticated painting by Cornelius Norbertus Gijsbrechts, *Trompe l'Oeil with Studio Wall and Vanitas Still Life*, we see the deep roots of trompe l’oeil painting’s metapictorial issues (figures 1.10). The ragged canvas corner of the inset *memento mori* painting suggests that painterly illusionism is itself part of the hubris that is framed by the theme of *vanitas*, issues I will explore in greater depth in chapter three.

The history of trompe l’oeil in America is somewhat disjointed. A 1777 lithograph map of Boston by the loyalist Henry Pelham features a trompe l’oeil note and drafting compass that appear to sit on the surface of the map (figure 1.11). Samuel Lewis, an American cartographer and calligrapher who lived and worked in Philadelphia created several drawings that utilize the letter rack motif that often occurs in late nineteenth century American trompe l’oeil paintings, a motif this dissertation will explore in great depth in chapter four (figure 1.12). Lewis was the most prolific trompe l’oeil artist in the American epicenter of art and culture in the Early Republic, Philadelphia. Charles Willson Peale used this style in his well-known *Staircase...*

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48 Bellion, *Citizen Spectator*, 177.
Charles Bird King, an American painter who would have encountered seventeenth-century Dutch trompe l’oeil painting during his studies in Europe, made at least two trompe l’oeil paintings: *The Poor Artist’s Cupboard* (c. 1815) and *The Vanity of the Artist’s Dream* (1830) (figures 1.14-1.15). Raphaelle Peale, son of Charles Willson Peale, created several trompe l’oeil paintings, the sole surviving of which is a painting called *Venus Rising* from 1822, simultaneously reprising the curtain motif from Pliny’s account of Parrhasios and making a joke about American audiences who would cover a nude painting with a cloth to protect innocent or prudish viewers (figure 1.16). Genre painter William Sidney Mount (1807-1868) painted trompe l’oeil sheet music onto a music stand sometime during his career, giving us one of only a few examples of trompe l’oeil painting from the middle decades of the nineteenth century (figure 1.17). It is only in the 1870s when William Harnett began experimenting with the style during his initial years working and studying in Philadelphia and New York that trompe l’oeil returned to a level of prominence. Peto, Haberle, and others developed and perpetuated this style. 

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49 On Charles Willson Peale and an interrogation of how the *Staircase Group* would have deceived and signified in its original exhibition context, see Bellion, *Citizen Spectator*, 63–111.


51 On Mount’s music stand, see Franklin Kelly’s catalogue entry in *Deceptions and Illusions*, by Ebert-Schifferer, 203.

52 Chad Mandeles found that there would have been at least one seventeenth-century Dutch vanitas painting on display in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which Harnett may have seen while he was living in New York City in the early 1870s. See Mandeles, “William Michael Harnett’s ‘The Old Cupboard Door’ and the Tradition of ‘Vanitas,’” *The American Art Journal* 18, no. 3 (1986): 52–53, 56.

While few examples of trompe l’oeil in painting exist from the middle of the nineteenth century, if we turn to the graphic arts, lithography in particular, we find fairly frequent appearances. This, I argue, is a vital missing link, one overlooked because of the tendency to discount popular printing as a valid source of inspiration for the fine arts.\textsuperscript{54} Peter S. Duval, the most prominent printer in Philadelphia in the antebellum period, effectively used a trompe l’oeil effect for his company’s advertisement of their lithographic capabilities (figure 1.18).\textsuperscript{55} We can imagine that this advertisement would have been quite convincing, demonstrating the verisimilitude of the lithographic process and appealing to viewers to reach out and touch the ad, just as they might handle the represented printed products. The trompe l’oeil effect is particularly successful in this instance because the represented objects have the same the medium and materials as the representing image. In chromolithographed trade and greeting cards from the 1870s and ‘80s, we often see stylized trompe l’oeil motifs (figures 1.19). For example, a floral card may depict the stem emerging from a cut in the paper support, but the execution of this depiction gestures towards an illusory effect without actually achieving it. The stylized version seems to signify cleverness and tactility without actually achieving the “eye-fooling” factor. The added tactile appeal of objects reaching out from the surface, towards the beholder is perfect for a hand-held card. The best evidence for this link between painting and printmaking is the painters’ representation of lithographed items with trompe l’oeil effects. We see a trompe l’oeil effect on the cover of the baby naming pamphlet in Haberle’s \textit{A Bachelor’s Drawer}. Peto also includes greeting cards with stylized effects in several of his paintings (figures 1.20-1.22).

\textsuperscript{54} I would not have seen this connection without conversations with Lauren B. Hewes, curator of graphic arts at the American Antiquarian Society.

\textsuperscript{55} For an extensive account of the development of lithographic and chromolithographic industry in Philadelphia, and Peter S. Duval’s company in particular, see Marzio, \textit{The Democratic Art}, 23-40.
Theory and Methods

Art historians frequently segregate by medium. Scholars specialize in print culture or in painting, for instance, and in so doing often overlook connections between them. Late nineteenth-century trompe l’oeil paintings, however, demonstrate that the artists did not operate in a vacuum of visual culture consisting entirely of painting. This dissertation contributes to the growing body of scholarship that investigates the complex relationship between painting and photography. While such inquiries make a much-needed intervention, this study finds that it is not enough to study these two media in isolation from print culture. Trompe l’oeil paintings of both prints and photographs as subject matter signal rich connections across all three media, which this study aims to illuminate in order to further understand what it was like to make and view images during the late nineteenth century.

The printed matter, photographs, and paper scraps in trompe l’oeil paintings collectively form a consistent iconography of paper-based media. This dissertation takes an iconological approach to interpreting this unusual subject matter. In order to understand what this iconography meant to historical viewers, I pursue three interconnecting paths of research. I seek to understand what it meant to represent other visual media in paint, to interpret the persistent

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motif of deteriorating paper, and to uncover how historical viewers interacted with and made meaning from individual items and collections of popular visual culture.

In *A Bachelor’s Drawer*, viewers encountered painted translations of engraved, photographic, and chromolithographic images. For painters to paint from photographs was nothing extraordinary. Since the availability of photography, many painters used portrait photographs as the basis for a painted portrait—to supplement or supplant time with the sitter. For prints to represent paintings was again nothing new; this had been happening for hundreds of years. These are examples of the translation of images, the borrowing or adapting of subject matter, which has long been standard procedure for artists and image makers of all kinds. What is remarkable about *A Bachelor’s Drawer* and other trompe l’oeil paintings is their representation of photographs and prints as such. By choosing to depict whole mediated images, not just their contents, trompe l’oeil painters found a way to create metacommentary on print and photographic media. They also foregrounded the increasing fluidity between visual media.

The changes in visual technology in the late nineteenth century meant that not only were there far more images available in a variety of media and forms, but that the visual environment was far more heterogeneous and fluid. People perusing an illustrated magazine might encounter an engraving after a photograph on the same page as an engraving after a painting or drawing, or one after a photograph of a drawing (figures 1.23-1.25). Wood engravings and halftone prints sometimes appeared on adjacent pages in the same periodicals, as we see in an 1887 issue of *Harper’s Young People* (figures 1.26-1.28).58 Photographic reproductions of paintings long

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58 Wood engraving, because it could be readily combined with movable type, rose to the forefront of image production for books, magazines, and newspapers. The production of books and periodicals increased drastically over the course of second half of the nineteenth century, due in large part to the change from rag paper to wood pulp. First developed in the 1790s, wood engraving combined engraving methods with woodcut technology, resulting in a cheap yet durable relief-printing block matrix. In the 1870s, wood engravers of what came to be known as the New School began to experiment with techniques that privileged tone and texture over line, narrowing
coexisted with engraving and chromolithographic reproductions. Each visual medium carried cultural associations based on public understanding of the process, typical uses, materials, and costs, and image translations from one medium to another (or several others) resulted in layered and sometimes contradictory associations for their viewers to parse. People embraced and replicated this heterogeneity of visual culture through their home decoration and scrapbooking practices.

the aesthetic gap between photographic reproduction, painting, and wood engraving. For a concurrent historical account of the importance and variety of wood engraving in America, see W. J. Linton, *The History of Wood-Engraving in America*, (Boston, 1882), http://hdl.handle.net/2027/gri.ark:/13960/t51g5qw2h. Already in Linton, we see the use of the name the “New School.” George Howes Whittle discusses the innovations the New School as well as the use of photomechanical techniques in later wood engraving work in “Wood Engraving in America,” *The American Magazine of Art* 10, no. 1 (1918): 3–10. Timothy Cole was one of the premiere wood engravers of the New School; for his reflections on the process, see Cole, *Considerations on Engraving* (New York: W.E. Rudge, 1921). For a more recent publication on American wood engraving, see William H. Brandt, *Interpretive Wood-Engraving: The Story of the Society of American Wood-Engravers* (New Castle, Del: Oak Knoll Press, 2009). For more information on the techniques and training of wood engravers, see Ann Prentice Wagner, “The Graver, the Brush, and the Ruling Machine: The Training of Late-Nineteenth-Century Wood Engravers,” *Proceeedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 105 (1995): 167–91. For wood engraving’s impact on the accessibility of fine art images, see Amy von Lintel, “Wood Engravings, the ‘Marvellous [sic] Spread of Illustrated Publications,’ and the History of Art,” *Modernism/Modernity* 19, no. 3 (2012): 515–42. Electrotyping, the process of creating a finely detailed metal cast of a wood engraving matrix, resulted in even greater durability and thus the ability to print greater quantities. Photomechanical printing processes such as half-tone printing and photo-engraving emerged in the 1880s and became much more popular in the 1890s. This technique allowed for the transfer of photographic images using print matrixes instead of negative exposures, and so, like photography, replicated an image without the interpretation of another artist’s hand. Like wood-engravings, these matrixes could be set along with moveable type and soon became the preferred way to print images along with text as it was much quicker and less labor intensive than carving a wooden block. The seeming lack of interpretive intervention also made it ideal for reproducing other works of art. For a discussion of why halftone engraving was read as photography rather than as printmaking, see Sarah Mirseyedi, “Side by Side: The Halftone’s Visual Culture of Pragmatism,” *History of Photography* 41, no. 3 (July 3, 2017): 286–310, https://doi.org/10.1080/03087298.2017.1353208. For a technical yet accessible investigation into the relationships between photography and illustration in America during the nineteenth century in terms of artistic expression and information transmission, see Estelle Jussim, *Visual Communication and the Graphic Arts: Photographic Technologies in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: R. R. Bowker Co, 1974). For a description of the uses and limitations of different photomechanical processes, including the heliotype, photogravure, woodburytype, and the halftone process, see Jussim, *Visual Communications*, 52-76. For a discussion of the combinations of photoengraving technologies and wood engraving, see Gerry Beegan, “The Mechanization of the Image: Facsimile, Photography, and Fragmentation in Nineteenth-Century Wood Engraving.” *Journal of Design History* 8, no. 4 (1995): 257–74; see also Stephen P. Rice, “Photography in Engraving on Wood,” *Common-Place* 07, no. 3 (April 2007). On the proliferation of images due to the adoption of the halftone process and its impacts on how people processed visual and text-based information in tandem, see Neil Harris, “Iconography and Intellectual History: The Halftone Effect,” in *Excursions: Marketing Appetites and Cultural Tastes in Modern America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 304–17.
Haberle, Harnett, and Peto were all artists who worked in multiple media. In addition to painting, Haberle was a lithographer, Harnett worked in metal engraving, and Peto was a photographer. Their expertise in these other media, I argue, enabled them to see with great clarity the areas of overlap in aesthetics, function, price range, etc. among different visual media. Their insight and investment in other media helped them to negotiate the cultural territory of their own painted work, and of painting more broadly as an artistic medium. Trompe l’oeil paintings from this period took a unique approach to addressing the changing image ecology by making it all the purview of painting.

I use the phrase image ecology to signal that this study will pay particular attention to the whole life cycle of images, including their interactions with people and other images: how images come into existence; circulate; spawn other images through reproduction, translation, and interpretation; and how images end, through deterioration or destruction. Above all, I use this phrase to call attention to how images and media interact with and relate to other images and media.

I used material culture studies methods to unpack trompe l’oeil artists’ intense focus on the material qualities of their subject matter. Their descriptions of photographs, trade cards,
stamps, etc., treat them not just as images, but as objects. This is essential to the success of their illusions and also of their cultural commentary. Reflecting the priorities of these artists, this project is deeply invested in the visual and material specificity of objects as historical sources that complement and complicate written documentation. Material properties such as texture, weight, and scale frame viewer behavior and can give us clues as to what was so exciting and distressing about the objects depicted in the trompe l’oeil paintings.

Correspondingly, a significant component of my research was finding, scrutinizing, and handling the kinds of objects represented in the paintings. I have traveled to multiple archives to see and handle old periodicals, genuine and counterfeit currency, tintypes, cartes de visite, trade cards, etc. In a few instances I was able to locate the specific item, even the artist’s personal copy that appeared in the paintings.\(^{61}\) I was then able to isolate the specific effects on the images of media translation and artistic license. This confirmed that trompe l’oeil painters rendered their subject matter with extreme detail and care, but not always faithfully. They sometimes made telling changes to the text or embellished deterioration. Even without the exact model for the object in the painting, I was able grasp the influential experiential elements of the different forms and media, such as the weight and feel of tintypes, the rigidity of cartes de visite, and the posture of looking dictated by albums of prints. Such qualities affected how historical viewers valued and understood the image-bearing objects depicted within these paintings.

In this study, the relationship between medium and content is intensified because often the content of a trompe l’oeil painting is an image in another medium, with its own mediated

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\(^{61}\) See my discussions in chapter 2 of Peto’s *Rack Picture and Bowie Knife, Keyed Bugle and Canteen*, 98-112.
content. For example, the dandy chromolithograph in *A Bachelor’s Drawer* is a painting of a chromolithograph of a dandy. The dandy is the content of the print, and the print is the content of the painting, so we see a doubly mediated image. How does the medium affect how viewers interpret an image’s content? This is a long-debated question, and one that is highly relevant to this study. I work from the premise that the medium connotes the message. Medium carries cultural associations that alter viewers’ perception of the content’s authenticity, authority, and cultural value. Media define audiences, and script viewing procedures. Viewers’ knowledge or ignorance regarding the way the medium is produced, typical uses and costs, can all inflect their reception of the content.

In seeking to understand the significance of the interpolation of images in trompe l’oeil paintings, this study found useful models in the theorizations of European Renaissance art. Victor Stoichiță describes many “meta-paintings,” paintings that depict or physically include

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63 I use Robin Bernstein's concept of 'scriptive' things. The idea is that individual material objects promote certain modes of use and discourage other modes of use through their materiality, which interacts with cultural norms of use for that type of item. This range of uses for an individual item forms the object's script, as in a theatrical script. Scriptive objects then invited people to interact with them in a set of scripted ways but did not limit or fully predict what individuals did with them. See Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood and Race from Slavery to Civil Rights* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 9–13. I extend it to apply this concept to media in order to suggest that each medium contains embedded historical conventions of use or viewer interaction that in turn affect the object’s or image’s meaning.
other paintings (in a manner much like collage), as self-aware reflections on the nature of painting in that historical context. In Stoichiță’s examples, the inset or interpolated painting was often a religious icon. He interpreted the surrounding painting as both drawing authority from the icon and shaping how viewers perceive the icon.64 This helped me formulate fruitful questions for my own study. How do late nineteenth century American trompe l’oeil paintings contextualize and mediate the images they represent? How do the changes in medium further shape viewer perceptions? Do photographs and prints have a source of authority that paintings seek to appropriate or undermine?

Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood’s discussions of interpolation and the representations of copies and in European Renaissance art deepen Stoichiță’s exploration of how such images create meaning through implicit comparisons. For example, in Sandro Botticelli’s *Portrait of a Young Man Holding a Medallion*, ca. 1485, the medallion icon is an actual icon fitted into a hole in Botticelli’s panel support (figure 1.29). The portrait re-contextualized the icon. Botticelli, the artist of the surrounding image, included the inset icon to highlights the differences between the two modes of painting. The icon has authority because of its mode of transmission of the image of the religious figure through a tradition of painting that encourages strict, ritualistic adherence to the model, and effacement of the painter of the individual iteration of the icon. Botticelli’s painting also claims authority through its likeness of the young man, but it differs significantly because of the relationship of the artist to the painting and the painting’s status as a unique work of art. In another project, Wood makes an important point about the representation of copies in singular media; he argues that painters represented prints to highlight

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64 See, for example, Stoichiță's interpretation of Tabernacle paintings in *The Self-Aware Image: An Insight into Early Modern Meta-Painting* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 68-76.
opposing qualities like originality and to assert boundaries between artforms. These ideas resonated with my readings of trompe l’oeil paintings and helped me to articulate the implied relationship dynamics between surrounding and inset images, particularly when media translation is involved.

My thinking about the implicit comparisons across media also takes into account the rapid technological evolution of print and photographic media during the late nineteenth century. As new techniques and technologies developed, new uses and new social associations also coalesced. Lisa Gitelman and Geoffrey Pingree’s study on historical new media describes how as any new medium—take, for example, chromolithography—arises and popularizes, there is a period of identity formation for that medium. This identity formation occurs in comparison to established media, and this can prompt a crisis of identity for both the new and old media, particularly if they are competing over the same cultural territory in terms of function, viewer demographics, price point, etc. This analysis clarifies the impetus for trompe l’oeil painters—artists in a traditional medium—to attempt to contain newer print and photographic media, and to seek to redefine painting in relation to these forms.

Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin’s investigation of how new digital media have made their place in society brings together the concepts of the formative period of new media and the quasi-competitive representation of traditional media. They theorize that digital media artists or creators have attempted to prove the authenticity and validity of their medium by evoking other

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existing media, a process they term “remediation.” They claim that new media typically present themselves as “refashioned and improved versions of other media.” In representing other media, digital media may seek to enhance the sensation of immediacy—an attempt to deny that mediation is happening at all—to bring the viewer an experience as close as possible to direct interaction with the subject matter. Alternatively, remediation can create an effect of hypermediacy, which is the act of obviating the mediation and inviting the viewer to take pleasure in it.

I argue that a similar process of remediation is at work in trompe l’oeil paintings. However, they seem to have flipped the relationship between new and old media. Harnett, Peto, Haberle and others remediated print and photographic media to assert painting’s validity and authority. Further, immediacy and hypermediacy are useful concepts to help understand how trompe l’oeil paintings’ appeal unfolds over time. Because of their high illusionism, trompe l’oeil paintings initially appeal to viewers through their seeming transparency, by effacing the medium of oil paint in order to give the sensation of immediacy. However, after viewers have inspected the painting and confirmed for themselves its material nature as a painting, the source of pleasure changes. The paintings ask the viewers to appreciate the mediation of oil paint and also to share in the artists’ fascination with the variety and abundance of visual media.

Hypermediacy seems to be what Washington Allston, American academic artist of the early nineteenth century was suggesting in his estimation of why still life paintings are so satisfying even when the objects they depict are not that wonderful in themselves. In such instances, immediacy would have limited appeal. Allston wrote,

> Of this we have abundant examples in some of the Dutch pictures, where the principle object is simply a dish of oysters or a pickled herring. We remember a picture of this

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kind, consisting solely of these very objects, from which we experienced a pleasure almost exquisite. And we would here remark, that the appetite then was in no way concerned. The pleasure, therefore, must have been from the imitated truth. It is certainly a curious question why this should be, while the things themselves, that is, the actual objects, should produce no such effect.69

I argue that trompe l’oeil paintings that represent prints and photographs, objects that have a certain appeal but bore less cultural status than paintings themselves, are satisfying in part because they encourage the viewer to shift from the visual pleasures of immediacy to hypermediacy.

These theoretical approaches stress the implicit comparisons between representing and represented images and media. These comparisons aid in media identity formation or reconfiguration through the dynamic of competition. Bolter and Grusin talk about the competition between media in terms of homage and rivalry, which need not be mutually exclusive.70 Adopting their view helps forestall the temptation to oversimplify media competition. Painting cannot be in direct competition with photography and print culture because there is not a singular prize to be won. While there is the risk of technological obsolescence—which we certainly see in print and photographic history as different processes arose and fell in popularity in a matter of decades—new media also define new purposes and audiences. Trompe l’oeil paintings’ remediation of print and photographic media evoke a complex cultural marketplace and visual ecology and actively negotiate painting’s territory.

The concept of remediation can be understood as a version of appropriation on the scale of medium rather than subject matter. Because trompe l’oeil paintings treat other media as


subject matter, I found theories of appropriation useful for further exploring their motivation for representing images from other sources. When trompe l’oeil painters incorporated photographs and prints into their paintings, treating them as subject matter and making their own painted versions, they engaged in transformative or referential appropriation. However, appropriation is notorious for hiding or distorting the origin of the borrowed image, motif, or style. Robert S. Nelson discusses the semantics of appropriation as subtly shifting the connotations of an image or text to the appropriator's purpose. The appropriation both continues and distorts the relationship between the original signifier and signified. Nelson intriguingly argues that the way to undo the power of an appropriation is to focus on the discontinuities between the original object's context and meaning and the new context and meaning. In the case of trompe l’oeil paintings, we see something different happening. The inclusion of the photographs’ mounting and margins of prints act almost like quotation marks, indicating that the painters wanted to acknowledge the external source of these images. In this way, they actually draw attention to their recontextualization of the source material, making their appropriations far from seamless. Further, by staging viewer experience to move from illusion to disillusionment, they seem to intentionally undermine the potential power of their own appropriations. What were these artists trying to gain from this qualified appropriation? What is it that these objects possess—what associations, what functions, what authority, what values—were these painters trying to make their own and yet keep distinct?


These questions point back to the necessity of historical contextualization. In attempts to discover what each medium meant to its historical audiences, I scoured household manuals, fiction, and periodicals for descriptions or opinions—anything that might illuminate the uses and associations that animate this subject matter. I also studied historical scrapbooks and photo albums in order to discern what compelled people about these items, what they sought to keep, and how they made meaning through their collections. En masse, these individual, intimately-scaled objects and accounts suggested larger scale hopes and fears surrounding the modernization of visual culture and of American culture more broadly.

**Temporality and Trompe l’Oeil**

This study posits that temporality is an essential element to understanding the cultural shifts of modernization and the visual and material arguments that trompe l’oeil artists presented to negotiate the cultural territory of painting among new visual media—to assert its continued cultural value. Many of the changes in technology during the second half of the nineteenth century were targeted at increased efficiency of travel, communication, and manufacturing. Train travel so outstripped the horse that it seemed to “annihilate” the distance. The telegraph

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73 On temporality and painting in the late nineteenth century in France, see Marnin Young, *Realism in the Age of Impressionism: Painting and the Politics of Time* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015); André Dombrowski, “History, Memory, and Instantaneity in Edgar Degas’s ‘Place de La Concorde,’” *Art Bulletin* 932011 (2011): 195–219. Young’s study in particular has many overlapping interests with this dissertation; Young focuses on the tension between the value of instantaneity and of endurance in Realist painting from the 1870s and 1880s, positing that Realists attempted to make paintings that encouraged viewers to engage in prolonged viewing, and that this was a means of resistance to the accelerating pace of modern urban life.


made communicating at a distance essentially instantaneous. Faster exposure times on photography, as epitomized by Muybridge’s Stanford trials, exceeded human beings’ capacity to perceive an object in motion (figure 1.30). In the realm of manufacturing, machines and steam power produced objects in far larger quantities and much faster than could be achieved by hand.

As the production of photographs and printed imagery raced along with the new pace of life, painting, by contrast, seemed much slower. It is in this same historical era when painters increasingly questioned the traditional academic painting processes: drawing followed by thin layers of paint, each allowed to fully dry prior to adding the next, and coated with varnish. Painters like Whistler and Monet pursued a sketch-like aesthetic that clashed with traditional notions of finish. Viewers of paintings like Impression, Sunrise can easily pick out individual brush strokes, seemingly hastily applied, and see the canvas texture clearly through the more thinly painted areas (figure 1.31). It is not at all difficult to imagine Monet painting this all in one rapid session—striving to capture the elusive light and atmospheric conditions. The sketch aesthetic reflected the swift pace of life while also distancing such paintings from the mimetic aesthetic increasingly associated with photography, as I will discuss in greater depth in chapter two.

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76 For a primary source on the increasing speeds of photograph exposure and development, see A. Bogardus, “The Experiences of a Photographer,” Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine (1886-1915); Philadelphia, May 1891, 574–82. For an account of Muybridge's Stanford trials contextualized by Muybridge's personal life and career, see Solnit, Motion Studies. For more on the instantaneous photography movement, see Phillip Prodger and Tom Gunning, Time Stands Still: Muybridge and the Instantaneous Photography Movement (New York: Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Center for Visual Arts at Stanford University in association with Oxford University Press, 2003), see especially 24-64. See also Leja, Looking Askance, 59-92. Leja interprets Thomas Eakins’s far from seamless attempts to combine observed reality (seeing) with the knowledge of reality revealed by instantaneous photography (knowing) in his paintings and the animating tension this gives his work.

77 On reading the broken and loose brushwork of Impressionist painters as echoing the rapidity of the modern urban environment—the matching temporality of style and subject matter—see Young, Realism in the Age of Impressionism, 9–10.
Trompe l’oeil painters, even though they adhered to the traditional methods of painting and notions of finish to create their highly illusionistic effects, were also responding to the increasingly rapid pace of life. By depicting speedily produced and often ephemeral photographs and prints, they reflected the changing visual world, showing its attractions as well as its limitations. They intentionally draw viewer attention to the differences in media between the subject matter and painting, to highlight what is of value in their traditional medium. They position the comparative slowness of painting as a positive quality, as a relief from the exhausting pace of modern life.

We see contemporary concern about the pace of modern urban life in George Miller Beard’s writing from the late nineteenth century. Beard was a physician and neurologist who wrote extensively about neurasthenia—a disease he defined and diagnosed as mental and physical exhaustion brought on by the overstimulating nature of modern life. It was the neurological cost of what he clearly considered the heights of civilization. The causes included “The invention of printing, the extension of steam power into manufacturing interests and into means of conveyance, the telegraph, the periodical press,” all of which sped up the pace of manufacturing and distribution and multiplied the volume of available information to be processed, thus overtaxing the human nervous system, according to Beard.78

Beard also wrote about the detrimental effects of people’s increasing attunement to the precise measuring of time. “The perfection of clocks and the invention of watches have something to do with modern nervousness, since they compel us to be on time, and excite the

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habit of looking to see the exact moment, so as not to be late for trains or appointments.” He noticed people feeling more and more pressure not to waste a single minute, constantly checking their pocket watches, worrying about the consequences of being late by even a few minutes.

This habit of checking watches, of paying more attention to smaller, measurable increments of time, is a symptom of a shift in temporality—in the way people experienced, though about, and measured time. Thomas Allen has argued that temporality has always been a defining factor of American national identity. At earlier points in American history, nature and religious traditions shaped temporality. The rising and setting of the sun, the turn of the seasons, the span of a lifetime, the geological age—these are markers of the passing of time set by nature. Religious and civic temporal modes derive from communal structures that guided how people spent their time and assigned meaning to the passing of that time. These communal structures vary in scale from the familial to the national, accounting for both political and religious affiliations. It is how people know when to gather for holidays, how long to spend in mourning, the length of term for an elected government official, and how to distinguish leisure from sloth. These shared understandings defined the rhythms of personal and public life and supported the potential for harmonious coexistence.

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Over the course of the nineteenth century, as industrialization and urbanization grew, technological temporality rose in significance. This mode of time, measured by clocks, is abstracted from natural and social conventions, working based on mathematical averages to mark precise and regular increments. It enables the potential for simultaneity across and beyond bonds of social timing; it is not personal or relative. It is the time of coordinated railroad activity, of waking to alarm clocks, and of wage labor.

As more and more people worked for hourly or daily wages, this changed the way they felt about the value of time, in relation to labor and to money. Many more people could look at money as a direct representation of the hours they had worked. Further, in the late nineteenth century, being able to save time was often equated with saving money. In a longer article about the moral and religious obligations to use time well, author P.C. Croll described the usual manner of his historical contemporaries of 1883 for thinking about time:

In a materialistic sense there never was an age where the price of a minute was higher than now. Time is valued as gold in the busy, work-day world. Time-saving machineries have been invented for every class of workmen. By their use the farmer speeds his work from seed-time to harvest; the traveler and merchant his travels and transportations; the correspondent and conversationalist give wings to their thoughts. Everywhere rattling machinery and revolving wheels tell us that time is money.

Ben Franklin’s old aphorism “Time is Money” took on new valences.

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84 Ward specifically discusses the resurgence of in use of Franklin’s aphorism in conjunction with the speed of railroad travel in the antebellum period. See Ward, “On Time,” 92-95.
The trompe l’oeil painting actually titled *Time is Money* introduces us to several of the ways trompe l’oeil paintings responded to the domination of technological timing and the increasing pace of life. *Time is Money* is a modest sized trompe l’oeil painting by Ferdinand Danton, Jr. (1877-1939), made in 1894 (figure 1.32). Like so many others we will see, it is oil on canvas painted to appear like a rough wooden surface with several objects suspended from it. Danton painted the wooden background to appear to be flush with the canvas, so that the objects—in this case an alarm clock and a bundle of paper currency—appear to be projecting forward, into the viewer’s space. This spatial projection, quite typical for trompe l’oeil paintings, establishes a different kind of viewer relationship in contrast to the traditional spatial recession of most Western painting.

The alarm clock and the bundle of cash both appear to be suspended from ribbons, tied to nails on either end of a leather strap. The clock is on the left and the money on is on the right—seeming to balance each other like the contents of the scales of Justice, encouraging viewers to read the two, left to right, like Franklin’s aphorism, and to see them as equivalent. Roughly carved into the wood between them is the word “is,” and below and between the pendulous objects, we see a scrap of paper bearing the phrase “Time is Money,” making the message more than obvious. However, closer inspection of the painting puts this simple, straightforward meaning into doubt.

Like all good trompe l’oeil paintings, this one lures its viewers closer to the surface. As the subject matter appears to sit on the surface of the painting, viewers inevitably paid close

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85 Frankenstein describes this painting in *After the Hunt*, 158.

86 Ebert-Schifferer considers this illusion of outward projection to be one of the hallmarks of “classical trompe l’oeil.” See “Trompe l’Oeil: The Underestimated Trick,” 22–24.
attention to this transitional space—getting as close as they can to try to read the clock, count the money, or figure out if the bills are counterfeit. Viewers also move closer to scrutinize the attempt to confuse their senses of perception, to see for themselves how the illusion was achieved. Up close, material factors like the glossiness of the paint, the weave of the canvas, or minute brushstrokes confirm the nature of the illusion. Many viewers of trompe l’oeil paintings used their other senses to better comprehend the deception—touch was a particularly useful one. Anyone gullible enough to make a grab for the cash would be very quickly disillusioned. In this case, the simple passage of time would indicate to viewers that something was not quite right.

Consider the alarm clock: an object that promises to produce sound in the form of the ringing alarm bell on top and which would also emit an incessant ticking as time progressed. Looking very closely at the small dial within the face of the clock that shows the time for the alarm to sound, we see it is set for 7 o’clock, the same time as the hour and minute hands read (figure 1.33). Observant viewers would see that time is very nearly up, that the painting depicts a alarm clock on the verge of going off. Because of its characteristic sounds, and, of course, movement—a clock is not a smart choice for a trompe l’oeil picture that really intends to fool a viewer for any length of time. But that is not, ultimately, what Danton seems to have intended.

The trompe l’oeil painting readily gives up its putative deception in order to reveal the innate falseness, or at least shallowness, of its content—in this case that time is money. To create such a highly polished, detailed, and illusionistic painting was surely a slow and laborious

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process. If Danton were to have cut corners or rushed his work, the effect would not be as fascinating. Saving time would benefit neither the painter nor the viewer.

While Danton’s time in slowly creating this painting surely resulted in a more satisfying trompe l’oeil picture, his time expenditure did not guarantee a higher price. An artist’s time and labor were typically not determining factors in the price of a painting. The artist’s reputation, the quality of the specific painting, the competition on the market, these factors separated artists from other kinds of laborers and artworks from commodities.

On one level, Danton’s ironic painting seems to be responding to the brewing concern that the values of capitalism were infiltrating and desecrating the fine arts. The famous Whistler v Ruskin trial (1878), an event that was highly publicized on both sides of the Atlantic, crystalized some of fears about the position of art in an increasingly industrialized, mechanized, consumerist culture. Disagreement about the proper relationship between an artist’s time and a painting’s cost was at the heart of the conflict.88

Whistler worked hard to cultivate a spontaneous appearance in his artworks, developing a technique of rapid painting that he believed gave his work a fresh and virtuosic look.89 He famously painted Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket in just two days (figure 1.34). Ruskin thought that asking 200 pounds for the work of two days was essentially a scam, ripping off the art buying public. Ruskin saw this an almost mechanical, formulaic production of art, seeking to get the highest prices for the lowest effort—a dire symptom of capitalist economics

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88 Linda Merrill meticulously reconstructs the trial and analyzes its aesthetic and cultural implications in A Pot of Paint: Aesthetics on Trial in Whistler v Ruskin (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press in collaboration with the Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, 1992).

and the logic of manufacturing impinging on the realm of art. Whistler sued Ruskin for libel when he printed these views.  

Whistler argued that he was not seeking to swindle the public by asking for such a high price for the work of two days. In his defense, he insisted that the painting was actually the product of a lifetime of learning and honing his skills and ideas. Although ultimately Whistler won the trial, having convinced the judge that he was an earnest painter who intentionally created paintings that he felt merited the prices he asked for them, the case did not satisfactorily resolve how an artist’s time and labor should impact the cost of a finished painting. At one point in the trial, Ruskin’s lawyers tried to argue that a paintings price should reflect the number of hours a painter spent on it, a misguided step that seemed to Edward Burne-Jones, one of the witnesses, to come too close to equating an artist with a common laborer, a house painter. What Ruskin actually found disturbing was that Whistler appeared to be trying to keep pace with manufacturing, to put forth minimal effort for maximum cost, valuing efficiency and speed of production over the quality of the finished product.

In 1876, a journalist for the Chicago-based Inter Ocean expressed a concern about the effect of selling art by auction that resonates with Ruskin’s criticism.

Now, we will submit to any reasonable reader if he were a painter would he not, knowing that his pictures are to be sold at a lower price than they ought to bring, would he not paint as fast as possible, to get all the pictures possible in time for the sale, and so make up a sum by the number of pictures? Now, care and thought are in art above all other professions absolutely necessary, simply because its products are more durable, and the

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90 Merrill, A Pot of Paint.

91 A far less publicized trial in Michigan in 1887 flatly denied that an artist’s time in developing his or her skills and knowledge should be part of the calculus of a painting’s cost. See “Law: Value of Painting,” Christian Advocate, Aug 4, 1887, 55, American Periodicals database. In the case of Turner vs. Mason, an artist painted a portrait on commission but without a contract. When the painting was finished, the patron did not like it and refused to pay. The artist sued for damages, asking the jury to determine the paintings worth based in substantial part on the artist’s long and expensive education, but not based on the time it took to make this particular painting, which was apparently a copy from a photographic portrait.
result more disseminated, excepting, perhaps, literature. Is it not likely that this haste will interfere with the quality?92

This quote actually draws a connection between the speed of production and the expected lifespan of the image, a connection that I will explore further in chapter four. Both this author and Ruskin clearly assume that speed in painting had an inverse relationship to quality, and that the pressures of modern capitalist society were adversely effecting painting. These views demonstrate the anxiety that went along with perceiving a growing connection between speed and the commodification of the arts; however, they cannot be taken as unanimous amongst all artists and art viewers.

Whistler created paintings that were unique, intensely idiosyncratic, and irrefutably handmade. The resultant paintings evoke the rapid speed of industrial manufacturing while rejecting its production values of uniformity, precision, and polish. His virtuosic brushstrokes act as an index of the movements of his hand, an undeniably human touch. Such visible signs of the artist’s manipulation of the materials continually remind viewers of the artist’s authorship of the artwork. This connection is the source of the painting’s authenticity and prevents it from being classed as a normal commodity. There cannot be the same kind of disconnection or alienation between painter and owner of the painting as Marx observed between producer and consumer.93

Whistler’s sketch aesthetic calls attention to his manipulation of the materials and provided distinction from the more easily commodified visual forms of lithography and

92 Quote from “The Fine Arts,” Inter Ocean, May 6, 1876. This editorial continues the same topic from the previous week, see “The World of Art,” Inter Ocean, April 26, 1876. Both articles accessed through Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers database.

photography. Trompe l’oeil paintings have a similar effect, achieved a different way. Trompe l’oeil paintings are highly self-referential, pointing to their own making as a matter of course. They entice viewers to look extremely closely at their surfaces, which inevitably results in the breaking of illusion and the recognition of the painting as a hand-made image. In contrast to Whistler’s bold and loose brushwork, the precise and minute facture of trompe l’oeil paintings evokes a laborious—if no less inspired—undertaking, taking not a matter of hours or days, but weeks or months. In this way, trompe l’oeil paintings distinguish themselves from prints and photographs through both their hand-madeness and implied speed of production.

As we will see in the following chapters, trompe l’oeil paintings engage with the changes in temporality in multiple ways. In chapter two, I further explore how trompe l’oeil paintings encourage viewers to contrast the speed of production among fine and popular media and how they encourage viewers to slowly engage with their paintings. Chapter three builds on these themes by investigating the way trompe l’oeil paintings position their medium of painting as relatively enduring in a culture suffused with ephemera. In chapter four, I approach trompe l’oeil paintings of photographs and ephemera as attempts to make the ephemeral permanent. Temporality is a through line in this dissertation, weaving through the individual arguments and approaches of each chapter, and tying the study to the larger issues of modernization.

Chapter two establishes the iconography of paper ephemera through a series of case studies of individual trompe l’oeil paintings. I argue that trompe l’oeil paintings deployed mimetic illusionism to strategically represent new visual media in order to harness its

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94 Tom Gretton wrote a convincing article that discusses how, early on in the use of photomechanical printing, certain French and British printers tried to adapt the signs of labor production associated with wood engraving in order to bolster viewers’ perceptions of their quality and value. See “Signs for Labour-Value in Printed Pictures after the Photomechanical Revolution: Mainstream Changes and Extreme Cases around 1900,” Oxford Art Journal 28, no. 3 (2005): 373–90.
communicative power, to explore the changing meaning of representation, and to assert
painting’s continued relevance. The polarized reception of these paintings reveals a growing
cultural split, which on the surface is about the role of mimesis in the arts but goes much deeper
into questioning what makes cultural expression true and valuable, and who gets to participate.

In chapter three, I approach the relationships among visual media through their physical
properties of durability and ephemerality. Trompe l’oeil paintings are peppered with depictions
of paper scraps, dilapidated books, stained photographs, and other signs of the fragility of paper-
based media. Scholars have read this deterioration as a manifestation of Peto’s personal distress,
but such ephemerality is also present in Haberle and Harnett’s paintings. This interpretation is
also problematic because it overlooks other social, historical, and aesthetic connections. To gain
a clearer understanding of the depictions of paper deterioration, I approach them in terms of the
aesthetics of age, the changing technology of paper and pigment production, the tradition of
vanitas imagery—moralizing imagery that represents the transience of human accomplishments
in the face of mortality, and the fascination with impending ruin. These interpretations reveal
critical self-reflexivity in trompe l’oeil paintings and a full arsenal of techniques to attract and
sustain viewer engagement, which ensures the works’ own cultural longevity.

In chapter four, I shift my focus from individual iconographic elements to consider
trompe l’oeil paintings as collections, exploring their coherence and incoherence as such. Here I
concentrate on ‘letter rack’ paintings, which represent ephemera tucked into ribbon lattices.
Seeking interpretive guidance as to how the abruptly juxtaposed, overlapping, and often-
fragmented objects relate to one another, I investigate the most prevalent form of late nineteenth-
century ephemera collections—scrapbooks. I argue that we find in scrapbooks a desire to
personalize and preserve ephemera, and through doing so, an attempt to gain a sense of stability
and control in an increasingly fluid and fast-paced visual culture. Trompe l’oeil painters responded to these desires by creating works of art that represent printed and photographic forms that go further to meet the underlying needs of personalization and permanence.

This dissertation argues that many of the late nineteenth-century American trompe l’oeil paintings work to negotiate painting’s cultural territory amongst other visual media, given overlapping audiences, functions, and sometimes even images. With its exceptional self-awareness, irony, and theatricality, trompe l’oeil paintings are perfectly poised to reveal the poignancy and limitations of their subject matter. Further, they used this distinctive subject matter to craft sophisticated arguments about how painting can adapt in order to remain relevant to this shifting society. Trompe l’oeil paintings offer us the opportunity to broaden our understanding of the diversity of creative responses to modernization. They provide invaluable insight into the historical aspirations and anxieties of the painters and viewers who strove to navigate the changing image ecology and locate themselves within the modernizing world.
Chapter 2: Trompe l'Oeil, Mimesis, and the Reproductive Arts

Introduction

John Peto’s Rack Picture represents a number of paper items caught up in a ribbon letter rack, tacked to a wooden board (figure 2.1). The photograph in the composition is especially striking. A sepia toned Beethoven glowers out from beneath his towering forehead and unruly hair. Strong light glints off the man’s impressive dome in the old cabinet card photograph, highlighting his status as a genius. The great composer died on March 26, 1827, several years prior to the invention(s) of photography, so how did he become the subject of a photographic portrait? What on first glance may have been mistaken for a simple photograph is in fact a photographic reproduction of another painting, reproduced again in Peto’s painting. Beethoven’s gaze pierces layers of translation by different makers through different media.

Peto's Rack Picture is a complex example of the iconography of new visual media that he and other trompe l’oeil artists explored. Through their remediation of pictures in other media, these artists posed sophisticated questions about the nature of representation and the meaning that specific media connote. The physical form of an image, its cost and availability, affected to whom the image spoke, how viewers interacted with it, and what cultural associations it conveyed. By creating hypermediated paintings—paintings that represent multiple visual media—trompe l’oeil painters recognized and participated in the increasingly fluid relationships between visual forms. By using their controversial mimetic style to harness the communicative powers of other media, they made painting accessible and relevant to a much broader population. Further, paintings like Rack Picture stage comparisons between visual media to position painting as a preeminent part of the visual ecology, despite the presence of increasingly advanced and omnipresent mechanical visual reproduction.
While these paintings delighted many of their historical viewers, they did not enjoy universal acclaim. The cultural elite found much to criticize in the style and substance of trompe l’oeil paintings. The polarized reception points to a growing bifurcation in the culture, which on the surface was about the role of mimesis in the arts but went much deeper into questioning what made cultural expression true and valuable, and who got to participate.

By investigating a series of paintings, including Peto’s *Rack Picture*, I establish the iconography of new visual media in trompe l’oeil painting. With each painting, I focus on a different medium or aspect of a medium, analyze the effects of media translation, and discuss how the painter harnessed the distinct visual competencies historical viewers would have relied on to interpret the paintings. With Harnett’s *The Old Violin*, I explore the mixed reception of mimetic art, compounded by associations with chromolithography. Haberle’s *Imitation* anchors my investigation of trompe l’oeil depictions of paper currency with its steal-engraved imagery. Haberle’s representation of multiple photographs in *A Bachelor’s Drawer* demonstrates the way trompe l’oeil painters exploited the communicative powers of this popular medium. Photography’s role as the reproducer and disseminator of paintings is the focus of my discussion of Peto’s *Rack Picture* and *Bowie Knife, Keyed Bugle and Canteen*. The chapter concludes with Peto’s *Ordinary Objects in the Artist’s Creative Mind*, which depicts both a photograph and a wood engraving, and yet it strongly asserts its value as a painting.

I argue that trompe l’oeil painting, in both style and subject matter, aimed to garner the attention and admiration of a broader social range of viewership. Prior scholarship on the provenance and exhibition history demonstrates the distinct social makeup of this group. Doreen Bolger has done the most to give shape to Harnett and Peto’s patronage. Bolger characterized Harnett’s patrons as typically self-made men of business. His patrons included men who owned
salons, drugstores, and haberdasheries, who manufactured envelopes and ran newspapers. A few made their money in railroads or banking. Peto less successfully pursued the same types of men. As Bolger surmised, Peto’s early rack paintings were often painted on speculation, targeting specific individuals in hopes of a sale. These men were doctors, a local politician, newspaper editors, and lawyers. He also sold at least one painting to a hotel saloon in Cincinnati. In the latter half of his career, Peto’s most important patron was James Bryant, a successful engraver who went to school with Peto and later made his fortune from the sale of the family brewery. Gertrude Grace Sill’s research on John Haberle reveals a similar demographic of patrons. Thomas B. Clarke, who owned paintings by both Harnett and Haberle, made his fortune in manufacturing lace and linen. Haberle’s patrons also include a bank president, a hotel owner, an envelope manufacturer (another patron shared with Harnett), and a saloon manager. Some, but not all, of these men fit the description of bourgeoisie—merchants, manufacturers, and bankers—people who earned a salary and did not work with their own hands—people who, according to Sven Beckert and Julia B. Rosenbaum, used their wealth to create a consolidated and exclusive class culture through, in part, patronage of the arts. The shop owners, lawyers, doctors, and white-collar managers who also purchased trompe l’oeil paintings were culturally, if not economically, on the margins of this group.¹

Trompe l’oeil paintings’ exhibition history suggests an even broader audience of viewers. In addition to showing in art academies, Peto, Harnett, and Haberle all sent paintings to local industrial exhibitions in various small or mid-sized cities around the country. Commercial galleries, saloons, and drugstores also hosted their works. This diversity of exhibition spaces indicates a diversity of viewers, including middle and working-class people. My research strives to better understand how these painters attracted and spoke to this broader segment of the population.

The Old Chromo Violin

The first case study is the most famous, and possibly singular, instance of a chromolithograph reproducing a trompe l’œil painting from this era. We look at William Harnett’s *The Old Violin* in both painted and chromolithographic form. This comparison reveals the deep divide between elite and popular aesthetics, which, I argue, the viewing conditions and inherent visual properties of oil paintings and chromolithographs further exacerbated.

Harnett painted *The Old Violin* in 1886, the same year as his return from a six-year stay in Europe (figure 2.2). It is one of his most celebrated paintings. The titular old violin was a recent purchase Harnett made during his sojourn in Paris, a valuable antique instrument. In the painting, the violin and bow hang from nails against a green wooden door. Sheet music dangles behind the violin, a small scrap of newsprint adheres to the door, and a letter in a blue envelope sticks out from the bottom frame. Like all trompe l’œil paintings, it appears to present, rather

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3 On the position of this painting in Harnett’s timeline, see Frankenstein, *After the Hunt*, 71–72; On the violin itself, see Carol J. Oja, “The Still-Life Paintings of William Michael Harnett (Their Reflections upon Nineteenth-Century American Musical Culture),” *The Musical Quarterly* 63, no. 4 (1977): 510-14; See also Thomas Birch and Sons
than represent its subject matter. It also demonstrates Harnett’s exemplary sense of compositional balance through his arrangement of forms, colors, and shading. Critics admired the painting for its beauty—its “perfect finish” and “matchless color.”

The painting also seemed to prompt a more active response during its two public exhibitions in 1886 and 1887; historical viewers experienced a strong desire to touch it. One visitor to the Thirteenth Cincinnati Industrial Exposition, held in 1886, gave a particularly rich account of the scene:

A painting [The Old Violin] has been added to the Art Gallery, which has created a furore [sic]. It has just been hung in the north end of the gallery, and has a crowd of bewildered gazers continually about it. It represents an old violin hanging on an old time worn door. By it hangs the bow, and under the violin is a sheet of music with dog-eared corners. A blue envelope is stuck in the warped lower corner of the door, and above it is a newspaper clipping, that a man wanted to bet $10 last evening, was pasted on the board. The lower hinge of the door is partly broken off, and rust marks have run down from the old nail holes. An old gentleman stood and gazed at it last night, through his spectacles, and finally said: “By Jove, I would like to play on that violin,” enthusiastically judging that many a touching melody had been wafted from its well resined [sic] strings. The gentleman never noticed the deception until he went closer to it and he was ‘completely got.’ A policeman stands by it constantly, lest people reach over and attempt to see if the newspaper clipping is genuine by tearing it off. They want to pull at the envelope as well.

This writer as well as others described the scene surrounding the painting like a popular attraction at a fair, a real spectacle. Multiple authors mention the crush of viewers, individuals

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4 These quoted phrases come from an 1886 Cincinnati newspaper clipping, excerpted and reprinted for the advertising pamphlet for the chromolithographic reproduction of Harnett’s The Old Violin. See this pamphlet, published by Tuchfarber and Co., in “Blemly Scrapbook,” 8-12.

5 Tuchfarber pamphlet in “Blemly Scrapbook,” 10.
who want to play the violin, and the guards posted to keep the viewers at bay. One journalist claimed to have actually touched the painting, with permission, in order to verify its true nature for his readers. He concluded “s’help me, it is painted.”

Such accounts ascribed the temptation to touch trompe l’oeil paintings to their incredible illusionism. People purportedly sought to use their sense of touch to check what their eyes told them. Regardless of whether the painting succeeded in truly fooling its viewers, much of the pleasure in looking at it stems from Harnett’s nuanced depictions of surface textures. The different depictions of wood in this painting exemplify this skill. Harnett captures the satin smoothness of the varnished violin, worn into softness at the bottom and top edges. The surface of the door is relatively rough, showing a more utilitarian finish, with cracks that might splinter at the touch. Seeing these textures recalls experiences of touching similar surfaces. These haptic sense memories are enough to spark a desire to reach out towards the canvas.

Michael Leja has written about the haptic appeal of paintings such as this one. He credits not only the represented textures but also Harnett’s strategic paint handling to create a range of facture on the canvas. Leja points to the many dog-eared papers, with bent corners that curl up and outward. These elements seem to reach towards the viewers, like an extended handshake. In The Old Violin, we can see these forward-reaching elements in the sheet music, the newspaper clipping, and the envelope. At these points of projection, Leja notes, Harnett often deploys a heavy impasto. In this composition, Harnett uses impasto for the upper left corner of the sheet

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7 See my discussion on the extent to which viewers were actually fooled in chapter 1, 14-15.
8 Leja, Looking Askance, 125-52.
music (figure 2.3). This is a striking contrast to the rest of the canvas, where Harnett effaced traces of his brushwork to such an extent that it is difficult to detect individual brushstrokes.

Harnett’s paint handling is part of the specific appeal of this image as an object, as a painting. For Walter Benjamin, such aspects formed a work of art’s *aura*, meaning the unique embodied quality of an image that cannot be reproduced. While this term certainly alludes to somewhat more ineffable qualities, the surface texture and facture must be included here. These act not only as marks of uniqueness but also as signs of making. To see the artist’s hand, to recognize that the image is a painting, is to be disillusioned. Such traces would make it impossible for keen-sighted viewers to believe for long that they were looking at a real violin rather than a painting of one. If the unbroken illusion was the only attraction here, then surely crowds would not have lingered in front of it for so long. Disillusion is essential to move viewers to admire the artist’s technique and the subject matter.9

To look at *The Old Violin* as a painting is to appreciate Harnett’s impeccable emulation of the subtle luster of aged wood, the rich depth of color in the varnish, and wood grain that appears to sink into the violin rather than to stand on the surface. The dusting of rosin under the strings, proof of recent use, recalls the bloom on red grapes. To contemplate the painting surpasses the visual pleasures of studying an actual antique violin—enhanced by the appreciation of Harnett’s artistic ability to capture such pleasures. The painting transports viewers into

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Harnett’s own slow, meditative observation of the subject matter—the time spent focusing on the myriad minor details as well as the whole form.\textsuperscript{10}

*The Old Violin* was first displayed at the Thirteenth Cincinnati Industrial Exposition of 1886, a setting in which speed and efficiency of production would generally have been celebrated. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, this was one of Harnett’s most critically successful exhibiting experiences; it received more attention than any other during his lifetime.\textsuperscript{11} Industrial exhibitions, which were like world’s fairs on a much smaller scale, served as showcases of local industry and entertainment. Fine arts were one attraction among many, so the audience at such events were likely not there specifically for the paintings. In this unlikely setting, amongst these unlikely people, Harnett’s painting was a sensation. In such a setting, the painting’s validation of slow production techniques and of slow looking would have offered a stark contrast to the ethos of the exposition.

While many local reviews lauded Harnett’s popular painting, a few saw its popularity as a sign of the lack of sophistication of both the painting and the viewers.\textsuperscript{12} This was a persistent complaint about Harnett’s work. The following year, a reviewer from *Studio* attacked Harnett on this account, bemoaning his “popular success in cheating the untrained eye.” The author went on to say, “Only children and half-taught people take pleasure in such tricks of the brush as Mr. Harnett has lately made the fashion.”\textsuperscript{13} Democratic paintings like Harnett’s *Old Violin* that could

\textsuperscript{10} My interpretation of Harnett’s painting as capturing the slow process of looking closely is informed by Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

\textsuperscript{11} Gerds, “The Artist’s Public Face,” 94.


be appreciated without an understanding of academic conventions or classical allusions threatened the cultural hierarchy. Those possessing that erudite knowledge attempted to preserve their position of power by labeling accessible art as debased.14

The primary point of contention was mimesis.15 To the populace, Harnett’s ability to paint so illusionistically and so naturalistically was a wonderful delight. To the cultural gatekeepers, trompe l’oeil style was un inventive at best. Harnett was accused of copying from nature.

Over a hundred years prior, on December 14, 1770, influential theorist Sir Joshua Reynolds, the first president of the British Royal Academy, spoke against copying in one of his famous discourses. Copying was a way to learn and practice, but it was not acceptable in fully formed artists. He said, “a mere copier of nature can never produce any thing great; can never raise and enlarge the conceptions, or warm the heart of the spectator.”16 Reynolds continued, "The wish of the genuine painter must be more extensive: instead of endeavou ring [sic] to amuse mankind with the minute neatness of his imitations, he must endeavour [sic] to improve them by the grandeur of his ideas; instead of seeking praise, by deceiving the superficial sense of the spectator, he must strive for fame, by captivating the imagination."17 Reynolds seems to find the concepts of mimesis incompatible with imagination.


15 Ebert-Schifferer provides a succinct historical summary of the status of mimesis in the fine arts, going back to ancient Greek and Roman sources, “Trompe l’Oeil: The Underestimated Trick,” 17–21.


17 Reynolds, Discourses on Art, 42.
Samuel F. B. Morse, speaking at the Second Exhibition of the National Academy of Design in New York in 1827, echoed the sentiments of Reynolds on the issue of mimesis. In explaining why still life as a genre is held in low regard, he stated:

“The peculiar merit of this class of pictures consists in the exactness of the imitation. A single glance proves their success in this excellence; it is one that is always so striking, that most persons think it to be the great end and most difficult attainment of painting; this is a great mistake. […] We can only observe, at present, that exactness of imitation is not the chief aim of painting, and that, although exceedingly fascinating, it ranks low when considered separate from other and higher qualities. The department we are considering, although it ranks thus low in the scale of works of art, has always been popular, and for the very obvious reason, that its chief merit is intelligible to all.”

If Morse were the judge of Harnett’s work, he would have noted his excellence in imitation, but dismissed the whole work as lowly because, to his understanding, such a skill was merely manual and not intellectual. Also note in this quotation that the genre’s aesthetic accessibility goes hand in hand with its low ranking.

These older academic views on mimesis and still life persisted in Harnett’s day. This was the perspective of the more critically acclaimed art movement—Tonalism. George Inness, Tonalist landscape painter, makes the division over mimesis clear in his comments on Harnett’s art.

“It is not what it represents. It is a lie. Clever, yes, but it gives you no sensation of truth… Now, in art, true art, we are not seeking to deceive. We do not pretend that this is a real tree, a real river, but we use the tree or the river as a means to give you the feeling or impression that under certain conditions a certain effect is produced upon us.”

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19 Wanda M. Corn gave the name of Tonalism to the body of work now recognized as such. See Corn, The Color of Mood: American Tonalism, 1880–1910 (San Francisco: M. H. De Young Memorial Museum, 1972). For more recent work on Tonalist paintings, see Marc Simpson, Like Breath on Glass: Whistler, Inness, and the Art of Painting Softly (Williamstown, MA: New Haven: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute; Distributed by Yale University Press, 2008).

An actual preacher, Reverend Frederic Taylor Gates, echoed Inness’s condemnation of Harnett’s work for its spiritual vacuity. After viewing *The Old Violin* on display in its second exhibition in 1887 at the Second Minneapolis Industrial Exposition, the Reverend warned his congregation “mere accuracy and vividness of delineation is of minor consideration in estimating the true worth of a picture…[the picture] is simply a trick.”21

Not everyone agreed. A review of one of Harnett’s other paintings contains this contrary perspective: “The highest triumph of artistic genius is in approaching the actual—in the perfect reproduction of the subject presented. This is a picture well worth seeing, and those who can appreciate the true and the good will no doubt find pleasure in looking upon it.”22

These clashing statements reveal a cultural bifurcation around the meaning of visual truth. What is truth in art? Is it based in observation, in appearances? Or is it based in intuition and in feeling? Who has the authority to judge? 23

Mimesis was accessible to many middle- and lower-class people without extensive prior knowledge of the historical and contemporary art world, unlike either academic or more vanguard painting. Tonalist painting, championed by Inness—and taken to the greatest extreme


23 See Gerdts, “The Artist’s Public Face,” 87-99. Gerdts identified this bifurcated reception of Harnett’s trompe l’oeil paintings as an effect of their exhibition context. When Harnett displayed his work in academic or other fine arts settings, such as National Academy in New York, the Art Institute of Chicago, or even commercial galleries like Philadelphia’s James S. Earle and Sons, critical reception tended to be dismissive or derisive. Instances of glowing praise much more frequently followed Harnett’s display at industrial exhibitions in smaller cities like Louisville or San Francisco—often far removed from the eastern centers of high culture. However, Gerdts also notes that regardless of published reception, Harnett found patronage in both geographic regions. Gerdts’ study does not account for the reasons behind the difference in reception, which leaves this aesthetic bifurcation between Eastern cultural centers (with the addition of Chicago) and Midwestern or Western provincialism as a self-evident, natural divide.
by Whistler—was not instinctively understandable because of its lack of easily distinguished subjects and greater emphasis on painterly brushwork and more emotionally expressive use of color. Such pictures, while they did not require extensive education in Greek and Latin, still left many viewers mystified, both in and outside of the academy. This cartoon from an illustrated magazine mocked the inscrutability of such painting and also ridicules the well-to-do woman who pretended to understand it (figure 2.4). As the gathered crowd struggles to decide which way up the painting should be viewed, a Mrs. Gushington, exclaims “Oh! Oh! Oh! Why, that way it’s even more lovely still! 24

Image-reproducing technologies acted as a wedge to widen the socially conditioned aesthetic divides. While the reproductive arts held the potential to grant greater geographic and economic accessibility to the fine arts, they also entailed certain aesthetic qualities and viewing practices that those with access to the originals deemed undesirable. To make matters more fraught, mimesis—copying from nature—became strongly associated with the mechanical copying of images. We see this in a line from Harnett’s obituary: “He copied in oil with the accuracy of a camera, and some of his paintings have attained wide celebrity by reason of their astonishing fidelity to their models and have been reproduced in chromo form and circulated by the thousand.”25 In this one sentence, the writer draws together not only photography and trompe l’oeil style painting, but also chromolithography—a very popular type of printing that also drew the ire of the elite fine arts community.

24 Quote and image reproduced in Burns, Inventing the Modern Artist, 283-284. See Burns, 277-327 for a more extended treatment of the public’s perception of modern aesthetic painting as mystifying, as opposed to illustration.

The one chromolithographic reproduction of a Harnett painting that we know about is *The Old Violin* (figure 2.5).  Frank Tuchfarber bought the painting in 1886 when it was on display in Cincinnati, apparently without the knowledge or consent of Harnett—who was in the hospital at the time. Once the painting belonged to him, so did the rights to its reproduction. F. Tuchfarber Co. lost no time in translating the painting into chromolithographic form. Gustav Ilg was the lithographer employed by Tuchfarber at the time, and his name appears on some versions of the finished print.

In general, trompe l’oeil paintings and chromolithographs shared remarkably similar reception. Both were praised for their technical proficiency and lambasted for their deceptiveness. Combining this style and medium highlighted their shared and fraught quality: mimesis.

Reproductive prints, or prints that replicate the imagery of a painting, have an extensive history in western culture. Print historian Arthur Hind credits Raphael as the first painter to hire an engraver to make copies of his work. Baviera’s prints of Raphael’s work expanded his fame by making his compositions widely available, which in turn resulted in greater demand and value.

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26 This chromolithograph could be purchased in several ways. For a premium price, customers could buy the image printed onto stretched canvas and already furnished with a frame. There are also some versions transferred onto glass, preserved, for instance, in the Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco. I inspected the copy of the chromolithograph in the Art Institute of Chicago, and it is simply executed on paper. This version bears the name “Donaldson Art Sign Co. of Cov, KY;” and copyright 1887. The copyright date refers to the date the lithographic stones were created. Tuchfarber gave the stones to Donaldson soon after they were made, in payment of a debt. Donaldson’s company was, at the time, situated in Cincinnati, but moved in 1913 to Covington, KY. Therefore, this run of prints dates to 1913 or later. According to the great grandson of the original Donaldson, the same stones were used to produce each run of the print. As chromolithographic stones were expensive and time consuming to produce, there is no reason to doubt his assertion.

27 For the commissioning and sale of the painting, see “Harnett. How George Huling Lost His Fiddle,” *The Evening Item*, June 11, 1895.

28 For more on Tuchfarber as a printer and the production of this specific print, see Peter C. Marzio, *The Democratic Art: Pictures for a 19th-Century America: Chromolithography, 1840-1900* (Boston: Fort Worth: D.R. Godine; Amon Carter Museum of Western Art, 1979), 146–48; See also Frankenstein, *After the Hunt*, 73-77.
for his paintings.\textsuperscript{29} When the American artist John Singleton Copley displayed *The Death of Major Pierson* in 1784 in London, he sold subscriptions for an engraving of the picture, which he commissioned and distributed nearly ten years later. For Copley, these print subscriptions helped supplement his income and later served as souvenirs for his audience. One of his contemporaries commented that these prints would ensure a more lasting memory of his work than the painting itself, equating multiplicity with durability.\textsuperscript{30}

The antebellum era in America was a particularly interesting time for reproductive prints due to the formation of art unions.\textsuperscript{31} These organizations, most famously the American Art-Union, bought hundreds of paintings from contemporary artists for low prices. They sold subscriptions to people nationwide. Subscribers received a copy of a steel engraving of the top painting of the year, a chance to win one of the paintings in the annual raffle, and a copy of their highly illustrated journal.\textsuperscript{32} During their heyday in the 1840s, art unions, while ultimately deemed illegal as a form of gambling, claimed for themselves the highest ideals of democracy in making art accessible to the masses. This was important, art union supporters claimed, because developing taste in fine arts elevated the minds and souls of viewers, making them better people.


\textsuperscript{32} Kimberly Orcutt claims that the subscription to the illustrated journal was a major draw for people to become members of the American Art-Union. The *American Art-Union Bulletin* as a source of art criticism and a vehicle for shaping ideology and the art market was the focus of her recent talk, “The American Art Union Bulletin: Provoking Critical Conversation.” Delivered on February 14, 2019, at the 107th Annual College Art Association conference in New York City.
and better citizens. In the years following the Civil War—bringing us up to Harnett’s time—the art of wood engraving also exponentially expanded print production, and many illustrated periodicals, such as Harper’s Weekly, used this technology to disseminate reproductive prints.

Chromolithography was the newest form of printing used to reproduce paintings; the qualities of this medium proved especially popular and also notorious amongst the fine arts elite. Chromolithography is a planographic form of printing. Rather than using either intaglio or relief carving to form the print matrix, the artist draws the design directly onto a prepared stone plate using a grease pencil. Then the artist washes the stone with gum arabic and diluted nitric acid to fix the design. The stone plate is then wet with water and rolled with ink. Chromolithographic ink is oil based, so it does not stick to the wetted blank areas and only adheres to the greased design. To transfer the design onto paper, a sheet is laid over the stone, and then both pass through the printing press. The resulting print is a mirror image of the design on the stone. This is the basic lithographic process. To make a chromolithograph—a color lithograph—the artist prepares multiple stones, one for each color. Each stone plate must be perfectly registered so that the layers of ink overlap on the page to create the image. The more stones, the more nuanced range of hues the printer could achieve—and the more expensive the final print. Ilg and his team created the chromolithograph of The Old Violin using 17 stones.33

Like the art union’s dissemination of engravings, producers of chromolithographs proclaimed an educational and decorative mission. Louis Prang, one of the most prolific and evangelical chromo producers, referred to his craft as the ‘handmaiden of painting.’ Prang purchased hundreds of paintings to reproduce as chromolithographs in various forms; purchasing

33 For a basic explanation of chromolithographic process, see Marzio, The Democratic Art, 8-9, see 64-93 for an in-depth explanation of each step of the process. For the specifics of the Tuchfarber chromo, see Marzio, 146-48; see also Frankenstein, After the Hunt, 73–77.
the painting also purchased the copyright. He proclaimed that this practice helped artists gain in fame and, at the same time, made quality pictures financially accessible to the public. Prang claimed that chromos retained all of the spiritual and intellectual benefits of the model paintings. In short, he claimed that chromolithographs were the aesthetic equal of paintings.

However, the process of chromolithography, as it developed in the US, was much better at translating certain kinds of paintings. Peter Marzio identified the affinity between chromolithographers and the so-called Düsseldorf style, which is characterized by well-developed naturalism, tight academic drawing and a proclivity for fine detail. Significantly, as more Düsseldorf style paintings became available as chromos, the association with chromolithography served as another push for fine artists to abandon meticulous realism as the century waned. It is for that naturalism, however, as well as their bright colors, and inoffensive subject matter, that chromolithographs became a mainstay of decoration in lower- and middle-class homes. Such was their ubiquity that household manuals recommended selecting subjects appropriate to each room—fruit or game still life images for the dining room, genre or history paintings for the parlor, etc. It is easy to imagine The Old Violin making an appropriate addition to a parlor or music room.

34 Marzio, The Democratic Art, 94-104.


While the many embraced chromolithography, the few objected, and loudly. Amongst the complaints against chromolithography were its links to both industrialization and commercialism. While prints in general lacked the same direct contact with the artist’s hand, chromolithographs were especially targeted for their use of steam-powered printing presses. Printers were proud of their modernization, and often boasted of their industrial processes in trade journals and advertisements. Some critics were wary of this combination of art and technology. A journalist for the Art Amateur in 1881 decried chromolithographs as “too mechanical to be artistic” even when compared to engravings or photogravures.

Chromolithographs carried the taint of commercialism. While we are most interested in chromolithography’s use in reproducing paintings, it was also widely used in advertising, so much so that eventually the association clung to the medium. Cultural observers also could not ignore the fortunes that Prang and others made from their prints.

The strongest objection to chromolithographs was precisely their point of pride—their close resemblance to painting. This closeness, critics claimed, could deceive the untrained viewer into believing a chromo was a painting, and thereby rob this naïve viewer from the real joys of experiencing actual paintings. Wanting it both ways, critics also claimed that chromolithographs were drastically different from paintings in aesthetic terms, and thus faulted chromo producers with false advertising. E.L. Godkin put it succinctly in 1870, declaring that a chromo “disappoints even while it deceives.”

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37 Marzio, The Democratic Art, 88.
38 Marzio, 129.
39 Marzio, 1–6.
40 Marzio, 206–10.
The threat of deception is of course one of the main complaints about trompe l’oeil painting. If Harnett’s painting *The Old Violin* could ostensibly fool the eyes of its viewers into seeing an actual violin and bits of paper stuck to a door rather than a painting, Tuchfarber’s chromolithograph might fool viewers into thinking they beheld a painting rather than a print. The advertisement for the chromo includes several excerpts from newspapers that describe the painting as convincingly illusionistic, seeming to claim that the print after the painting shared this ability.

Stylistically, trompe l’oeil painting would seem to be an ideal model for chromolithography. The planographic printing method produces a smooth final product, without the lines and hatch marks of engravings or etchings, and no indentations left on the paper from the pressing. Trompe l’oeil painting, because it seeks to initially deceive its viewers, typically blends away most signs of brushwork. In Harnett’s paintings, except for his controlled use of impasto, his facture is almost undetectable.

In this notably rare example of the combination, reality does not live up to potential. While the chromolithograph shares many elements of composition and design with the painting, the overall effect is immediately and viscerally different. The failings of the chromo to perfectly replicate the painting are in its lack of capacity for subtlety and nuance of color mixture, and the loss of extremely fine detail. The wood grain and patches of red varnish sit on the surface of the violin. The subtle dusting of rosin becomes a pile of table salt. Further, the parts of the violin seem oddly separate, refusing to cohere into a whole object. While the chromo may fool some viewers into thinking it is a painting, it is no longer effective as a trompe l’oeil painting.42

42 Frankenstein noticed that the musical notation on the sheet music also differs between painting and print. In Harnett’s painting, the scores, though interrupted by the violin and only partially labeled, are correctly transcribed, known works. The top half is an excerpt from Bellini’s *La Sonnambula*, and the lower half contains a popular contemporary song, “Helas, Quelle Douleur.” Ilg inaccurately transcribes both pieces. See Frankenstein, *After the*
This print was originally produced and sold in Cincinnati, where the painting was first on display. It is likely that the earliest audience for the print could have compared it to the painting, at least in memory. What did they make of the differences? The print did sell, so did its purchasers not mind the differences? Did the chromo serve a different purpose than the painting, and was it held to different aesthetic standards? Could it have acted as a souvenir of seeing the painting, rather than as a stand-in for the painting itself? Surely there were also many consumers of the chromolithograph who never saw the painting. Would these viewers still think of it as derivative? Would Harnett’s actual painting surprise them?

The advertising for the print reveals that, at least initially, the print’s link to the painting was a large part of its appeal. F. Tuchfarber Company produced an advertising pamphlet soliciting subscriptions. On the cover, we see a small wood engraving of the framed print with the caption: “Size 24 by 33, mounted on Canvas and Stretcher. Elegant 3-inch Hard Wood Frame. Price, $12.00, complete.”43 Neither the words “chromo” nor “print” are even mentioned. It emphasizes the material trappings of painting: canvas, stretcher and “elegant” hard wood frame. These elements attempt to fool the casual visiting viewer into believing it is a painting.

An inner page of the pamphlet provides a more extended written description:

“We take pleasure in announcing the completion of a faithful reproduction of “Harnett’s” famous Painting, “The Old Violin,” which created such a furor at the Thirteenth Cincinnati Industrial Exposition. We have not spared either time or money to produce an exact fac-simile of this wonderful picture. No one who loves pictures can afford to be without this work of art; it will add a new feature to any art collection, being an uncommon subject superbly executed.”44

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43 Tuchfarber pamphlet, in “Blemly Scrapbook,” 9–12.

44 Tuchfarber pamphlet, 11.
This advertisement makes several extraordinary claims. First, the ad specifically evokes Harnett’s name and calls attention to the famousness of his painting, reminding or informing potential buyers of why the print is worth having. It also seems to justify the expense of the product by referencing the time and cost of production, which also serves as a guarantee of the end product’s quality. By pointing out the time involved in production, this ad calls attention to the labor of creating the stones rather than the speed and efficiency of the mechanized and steam-powered printing, seeming to align it more with the slow work of creating an original painting. The ad, notably, does not mention the skill of the lithographer, Gustav Ilg, as if the time and money alone created the print. By omitting a direct mention of the human intervention, the ad leaves the readers to simply associate the image with Harnett.

The ad states that the print is both a “faithful reproduction” and an “exact fac-simile,” claiming both authenticity and accuracy for this copy. Precision, in this instance, is presented as a positive, desired quality, and authenticity comes from the printer’s earnest efforts to accurately represent the original. Remembering that this closeness was cause for some to accuse chromos of deception, we see in this ad that the writer spins this act of imitation into something moral, even truthful, with the use of the descriptor “faithful.”

Miles Orvell argues that imitation was the primary mode of cultural production during the Victorian or genteel nineteenth century, which precedes a major cultural shift to modernity with the renewed interest in creating authentic content. Orvell uses the terms ‘imitation’ to mean derivativeness and the term ‘authenticity’ to mean originality. He situates these terms as antithetical and mutually exclusive. Genteel artists copied nature or each other rather than truly
inventing. Trompe l’œil painting, as it was generally understood, would fit squarely within this concept, and chromolithography as well.\textsuperscript{45}

The idea of the “faithful reproduction” connotes both authenticity \textit{and} imitation: a reproduction made in good faith and a copy that is true to the model. This phrase speaks to an audience who understood these ideas to be compatible. It was critics like Godkin and artists like Inness, elite figures, who began to redefine authenticity as diametrically opposed to imitation and who took issue, therefore, with mimesis.

Perhaps the most audacious claim of the advertisement is that the chromo was itself a work of art. To those critics who balked at trompe l’œil painting as merely mechanical, the print made after such a painting was much worse. Of course, again, it was the purchasing public rather than the art critics that the ad sought to impress.\textsuperscript{46}

Reproduction itself was not so problematic for the fine arts world as a lack of originality. While these concerns are overlapping, there is an important distinction that can be clarified by comparing chromolithography to etching—the printmaking form of choice of many of the fine art critics.\textsuperscript{47} To their minds, this reproductive art was the most suited to original and expressive

\textsuperscript{45} Orvell, \textit{The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880–1940} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989). See Orvell, 36–38 on chromolithography and 121 on Harnett’s painting. Focusing on the consumers’ enjoyment of imitative objects, Orvell’s study of the mimetic mode of culture overlooks the power of such objects to critique their referents and culture more broadly. Orvell’s dichotomy leaves no room for the kind of critical mimesis and self-reflexive commentary that I argue is present in trompe l’œil painting.

\textsuperscript{46} It is interesting to note that the classification of chromolithographs shifted between Philadelphia World’s Fair in 1876 and the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893. In the former, chromos were displayed with fine art in other media including painting; in the latter, chromos were categorized as industrial art. See Marzio, \textit{The Democratic Art}, 205.

work, qualities that both trompe l’oeil painting and chromolithographs apparently lacked. With chromolithography, uniformity of printing—so that one copy is identical to the next—is the industry ideal. Collectors of etchings prized the individuality of different prints pulled from the same plate. Etching printers even developed techniques such as *retroussage* to provide this treasured variety. With this technique, the printer not only works the ink into the etched grooves but also intentionally blurs some of the lines by bringing the ink up onto the smooth surface of the plate, creating a softer, and more idiosyncratic effect to the line.

Again, the ability to pull multiple prints from an etched plate, to sell reproductions in quantity, was not what troubled critics. Making art affordable and accessible was part of the hope of the Etching Revival, a movement concurrent with Tuchfarber’s chromolithograph of *The Old Violin*. Those promoting etching as a medium hoped that people would collect them in albums, not try to frame them and hang them on walls. These were objects for personal study, rather than decoration.

This shift in viewing conditions suggests distinct modes of experience. A chromolithograph hangs in a room to add color and interest to the walls. Its constant presence fades into the background and becomes part of the ambiance of a room. Viewers may encounter it sweepingly, as part of a larger environment in which other activities claim their attention. Conversely, opening an album to view a collection of etchings suggests a focus of intention and a personal, introspective experience. Although proponents of chromos said they were both

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50 On *retroussage* and the valuing of the unique, idiosyncratic qualities of individual prints, see Ackley, “Sylvestor Rosa Koehler,” 147.

51 Ackley, 150.
educational and decorative, we can see that when compared with etchings, chromos are more closely aligned with the decorative.

Further, critics celebrated the line work of etchings as especially free and expressive. To make an etching, the artist thinly coats a metal plate in wax. The etcher cuts through the wax with a needle—a process that should have minimal resistance—like drawing on paper. The plate, covered in wax except for where the artist has cut lines, is then treated with acid to etch the lines into the metal surface. The wax is then removed, and the plate is ready for printing.

Because etching deals primarily in line, critics understood it to be a more transformative mode of representation. In 1883, Marianna van Rensselaer, a critic from Century Magazine, described the necessary translation of the subject matter into free, idiosyncratic lines as the proof of the intellectual work of the artist. This act of translation, rather than exact copying, demonstrates etching’s creative and intellectual demands and value. She wrote, “The etcher’s translation into expressive linear language of something which has shown no similar lines in nature, presupposes a power of clear analysis.” She calls etching an especially interpretive art, one in which the artist must omit many details to distill the essence of the subject matter. This is a far cry from the emphasis on naturalism and precision that characterized American chromolithography at the time.

Etchings were embraced by the cultural elite for multiple reasons, as we have seen: for their aesthetic qualities that move away from meticulous mimesis, for the unique appearance of individual prints, and for their viewing conditions. Chromolithography clashes with etching in each of these factors. What they share is the process of physical replication—the pulling of

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52 Van Rensselaer, “‘American Etchers,’” 886.

53 Van Rensselaer, 886.
multiple prints, and the financial accessibility this process affords compared to paintings. By selling their work for lower prices, but catering to higher tastes, participants in the Etching Revival hoped that a broader demographic of patrons would rise to the aesthetic challenge. Trompe l’oeil paintings such as Harnett’s *The Old Violin* appeared to do the opposite, catering to popular taste in an elite material.

Tuchfarber’s chromolithograph of Harnett’s painting reveals the strong cultural associations that formed between mimetic aesthetics, lower social class, and the reproductive arts—especially, as we have seen, with chromolithography. Harnett and other trompe l’oeil painters faced strong criticism for their persistent use of mimesis during this moment when the style came to evoke prints and photography rather than oil painting.

However, the material of oil paint and the skill of the painters not only to replicate subject matter but to engage the viewer were strong factors that separated trompe l’oeil painting from the reproductive arts. These factors especially come to the fore when the painters chose the reproductive arts as their subject matter, as we will explore in the remaining sections of this chapter. As much as mimesis presented a cultural problem, without it, trompe l’oeil painters would not have been able to represent these new media, to exploit their communicative and attention-grabbing abilities, while also emphasizing the relevance of painting.

**Haberle, Imitation**

The chromolithograph of Harnett’s *The Old Violin*, while extraordinary in many ways, is typical in that it is a reproductive print after a well-known and well-regarded painting. The oil painting, a unique, hand-made object, served as the original model for the chromolithographic copies. But Harnett and other trompe l’oeil painters also disrupted the standard flow of media translation by doing the opposite—by replicating the imagery of prints in their paintings. In other

Haberle’s \textit{Imitation} represents a small wood panel, roughly covered in black paint—a few cracks reveal the reddish-brown wood beneath. To this board, someone appears to have pasted two pieces of paper currency and tacked three small coins. The corner of a postage stamp peaks out from beneath one of the paper bills. In the upper right corner of the board, the artist crudely carved these words: “J. Haberle New Haven, CT 1887.” A modest frame of yellow pine surrounds the board, and a small tintype of a bearded man in glasses rests in the lower left corner of the frame. On the frame, someone has pasted and partially scratched away four postage stamps, clustered around the lower left corner, near the tintype portrait. A narrow strip of yellow paper with the artist’s name, J. Haberle, acts as a label—carelessly stuck to the bottom of the frame. All of this is an illusion, all oil paint expertly and exactingly applied to canvas—even the paint cracking off of the faux wooden support.
There are several layers of image reproduction occurring in this painting. Haberle not only imitates the currency, the paper money itself includes the reproduction of two portraits and a history painting. With each step of media translation, both the function of the images and the mode of viewer engagement shift, which in turn distinctly affects their cultural value.

The familiar portrait of George Washington on the one-dollar bill comes from Gilbert Stuart’s *Athenaeum Portrait* (figure 2.7).\(^{55}\) On the fifty-cent note, we encounter a portrait of Samuel Dexter, Secretary of the Treasury under president John Adams (figure 2.8).\(^{56}\) This is a posthumous portrait created by Walter M. Brackett. The genre scene on the one-dollar bill reproduces a painting by Christian Schussele called *Columbus, Discovery of Land*, which shows Columbus and his crew onboard the Santa Maria at the moment of the first sighting of the American continent.\(^{57}\) Schussele (1824-1879) was a successful and well-known history painter, who taught at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia. While we no longer have the painting, the image is more legible on a pristine bill (figure 2.9).

These paintings played by the rules of the academic value system, bearing subject matter of important historical figures and national history.\(^{58}\) Their value hinged on their ability to convey national history in a compelling way, preserving not only likeness in the portraits but also

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\(^{57}\) Hessler and Chambliss, *The Comprehensive Catalog of U.S. Paper Money*, 48. While this catalogue lists Charles Schussele as the artist, it seems likely that this is an error. I have found no historical references to an artist by that name. The image is consistent with the style and type of history painting made by Christian Schussele. Christian Schussele was known to have contributed other images for U.S. currency engraving. See Mark D. Tomasko, *Images of Value: The Artwork behind US Security Engraving, 1830s-1980s* (New York: The Grolier Club, 2017), 43–44, 54–55.

\(^{58}\) Morse, “The Exhibition of the National Academy of Design,” 175-180.
giving a sense of character that could serve as models for their citizen viewers. They served to promote a standardized version of patriotism by codifying a certain version of history. The Academy understood such subject matter to require artistic interpretation, as well as highly developed skills in composing and portraying the subject matter. Looking at paintings such as these was to appreciate them aesthetically and to study them for historical and moral instruction.

Skilled engravers translated these images and the other designs on the bills into a series of tightly controlled lines, scratched into the surface of a metal plate. Unlike in etching, where the designer cuts into a layer of wax or resin with low resistance, the engraver carves directly into a metal surface—a process of slow, deliberate, and measured movements. Engravers created modeling effects through patterns of adjacent contour lines, with varying line width, and also with cross-hatching techniques. A connoisseurial appreciation of engravings entailed looking at close range at the line work, possibly with the aid of a magnifying glass. In the portrait of Dexter, we can see the fine parallel lines, cross hatching, and stippling that define the contours and tones of the man’s face and clothing (figure 2.10). Jennifer Roberts describes these kinds of lines as labyrinthine, as traps for the viewer’s gaze to prolong engagement.

Does this material focus on the details of craftsmanship detract from or enhance the effect of patriotic inspiration? The question is almost moot because of the particular nature of looking at currency as opposed to regular engravings. Pieces of money are more typically stored or spent, not gazed upon for aesthetic pleasure or historical education. Bills have cultural and monetary

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value not because of their beauty but because the government vouches for their specific monetary value, or exchange value. Paper currency in its typical usage is in a commodity state, which, according to theorist Arjun Appadurai, means that “its exchangeability (past, present, future) for some other thing is its socially relevant feature.” People can exchange paper currency for goods and services. This is its primary function. This further means that values highly prized in the paintings that inspired these bills—their originality and uniqueness—have no value in the world of banknote engraving.

The portraits on the bills play a special role. The likeness of Washington and Dexter no longer act as inspiring role models of patriotic citizenship. Their cultural authority instead acts to guarantee the value of the object. Neither the painter nor the engraver retains artistic authority in this format. The people who matter are people who represent the government, not the people who made these objects. People do not value dollar bills because they admire Joseph P. Ourdan, Charles Burt, and Alfred Sealey—several of the engravers who worked on these specific bills—or even because they think Gilbert Stuart was a great portrait artist.

By portraying paper currency as subject matter in his paintings, Haberle recovers the aesthetic appeal of the engraved images. Reproducing the image of money in paint separates it from its utility, which allows its aesthetic values to come to the forefront. Seeing the bills through Haberle’s artistic vision, viewers could now appreciate the intricate linear patterns, the balance of text and image, as well as the portraits and genre scene.

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One of the most extraordinary elements of Haberle’s currency representation is his emulation of engraved lines, which are especially clear on the fifty-cent note. Looking closely at the seal on the right side, we can see an intricate, interlocking, perfectly regular pattern of lines (figure 2.11). Engraving such designs required the use of a special tool called a rose engine lathe, a spiralgraphic tool that could produce wavy circular lines at regular intervals. Such designs, being so difficult to correctly calibrate, were used as deterrents for counterfeiters. If this kind of line-work functioned in fine art engravings to sustain the viewer’s gaze, then surely Haberle’s painting of the engraving serves to enhance this effect. Realizing that Haberle made these markings by hand encouraged viewers to imagine the creative process in much the same way as more obvious brushwork compels viewers to think through the actions that created them. The contour lines and crosshatching that comprise Dexter’s portrait now demand awe and appreciation (figure 2.12).

Depictions of paper currency are rare in fine art, and many scholars have offered explanations for trompe l’oeil artists’ affinity for this subject matter. Alfred Frankenstein, an early and prolific scholar of American trompe l’oeil painting, argued that the main reason trompe l’oeil painters so frequently depicted paper money was that it was flat. The illusion of flat objects pasted onto a flat surface is difficult to detect because it does not require the viewer to stand directly in front of the painting. Perspectival illusions of voluminous objects tend to only work from a fixed viewpoint. 


64 See Frankenstein's Introduction to The Reminiscent Object: Paintings by William Michael Harnett, John Frederick Peto and John Haberle. [Exhibition] La Jolla Museum of Art, July 11 through September 19, 1965; Santa Barbara Museum of Art, September28 through October 31, 1965 (San Diego, 1965). There are no page numbers in this catalogue. The introductory essay is 5 pages long, and Frankenstein's assertion about the flatness of money as the primary reason for its prevalence in trompe l’oeil painting appears on the 4th page.
Frankenstein flatly denied that artists might have chosen to depict money because of its political and social associations. Bruce Chambers, writing several decades later, challenged Frankenstein’s assertion by pointing out that trompe l’oeil artists also included money in tabletop compositions, which do rely on illusions of spatial recession. Chambers argued instead that trompe l’oeil artists painted money because the American people as a whole during the late nineteenth century were obsessed with money and conspicuous consumption.

Surely both the flatness of paper money and the changing cultural values of Americans supported the choice of this subject matter generally. However, paper money cannot be read as a straightforward symbol of wealth or greed. It participates in a system of nationally codified signs that were problematic for their instability over time. In Haberle’s time, paper currency was a major site of social class division and political polarization.

Walter Benn Michaels offered a much more nuanced interpretation of this subject matter in painting. He argued that the emphasis on flatness created a similar physicality between the painting and the money itself. He saw in this physical similarity the same kind of logic at work in the debate over the gold standard. People in favor of the use of gold as money understood its exchange value or monetary value as equivalent to its aesthetic or material value. Using paper money at all, but especially if it was not backed by precious metal, presented a stark contrast between the physical/aesthetic value of the paper and its exchange value that made many people...

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65 Frankenstein, The Reminiscent Object, 4.

66 Chambers and Berry-Hill Galleries, Old Money. 15. Gertrude Sill, who wrote the only Haberle monographic exhibition catalogue, agrees with Chambers’ assessment of the reason for trompe l’oeil artists’ interest in currency as subject matter. See Sill, John Haberle, 13-14.

67 For a thorough yet accessible account of US economic fluctuations during second half of the 19th century, and artists’ responses, see Mazow and Murphy, Taxing Visions. Murphy’s essay “The Poor Artist? American Art in an Era of Financial Panic, Depression, and Speculation” 38-67, specifically looks at several examples of trompe l’oeil painting, which he describes as “evidence of artists’ engagement in the larger economic issues of the day…” See pp. 38-67, and 51.
deeply uncomfortable. While Michaels interpreted flatness as an essential quality of physical similarity, I would argue that the difference between the physicality, production processes, and viewer experience for printed paper currency and oil painting is crucial for interpreting these works of art.

While Haberle may have wished to pay homage to Gilbert Stuart, Christian Schussele, or the other painters, his move of translating imagery from print to paint hints at the competition between these media. The kind of competition between media that I am describing is not a simple economic competition for sales. While certainly photography affected the market for miniature painted portraits and images for home decoration, I am more interested in competition for viewer attention, for cultural relevance and status. Harnett, Haberle, and Peto were all multimedia artists, trained in metal engraving, lithography, and photography respectively. This gave them keen insight into the similarities and differences among media. I argue that in their work as painters, they made an effort to define boundaries and acceptable areas of overlap in function, cost, audience, etc.

In this instance, Haberle contrasts bank note engraving with painting. Banknote engraving provided stable, if unglamorous, employment for many artists during the nineteenth century. Haberle’s painting garners an aesthetic appreciation that the bank-note engravers rarely experienced. He also seems to flaunt his artist freedom to critique the culture through the

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69 Burns argues that the American Victorian press presented printers and painters as enemies, but this impression does not seem to be verified by the actions and lives of the artists. See Burns, *Inventing the Modern Artist*, 277-299. Michele Helene Bogart argues that illustrators during the late nineteenth century in America sought to attain a stable group identity as fine artists in comparison to easel painters. See Bogart, *Artists, Advertising, and the Borders of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 15-78.

70 Hind, *A History of Engraving & Etching*, 211.
specific currency he chose to represent. The one-dollar bill and the fifty-cent bill were notorious for their lack of stable monetary value. By underscoring this lack of stability, Haberle calls attention to a weakness in this federal program. Artists working for the government to supply the imagery for banknotes surely were limited in their artistic scope to subjects that would inspire confidence in the nation’s governance. In painting these particular bills, Haberle also invited his viewers to favorably consider the time-tested value of paintings.

The one-dollar bill in *Imitation* is a United States Note produced by the federal government (figure 2.13). This was a new type of bill; only in 1862 did the Federal Government begin minting its own paper currency. Previously, notes were issues by designated individual banks throughout the country. These new United States Notes were not backed by gold but by federal bond—they could not be redeemed for precious metal.71 United States Notes were commonly called “greenbacks” for the green ink used to print the designs on the back—the side that we cannot see in Haberle’s painting.

After the Civil War, the Federal Government also started issuing national banknotes. National banknotes differed from United States Notes because they *were* redeemable for precious metal. In the years following the Civil War, there were dual systems of currency, which began to separate by social class. People with accumulated wealth, or old money, wanted only national banknotes because they were worried about inflation. Nearly everyone else traded in greenbacks. There was an unequal exchange value between the two, at one point reaching the disparity of 1.82 greenbacks to one banknote. How to deal with this dual mode of currency and

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71 This particular series of notes, characterized by the red seal to the right of the central portrait medallion, was designed in 1869 and remained largely unchanged through 1880. The particulars of this design match the 1880 issue. The It is the first series of one-dollar notes to feature the portrait of George Washington. See Hessler and Chambliss, *The Comprehensive Catalog of U.S. Paper Money*, 48–50.
how US currency should relate to precious metal were major partisan issues for decades, lasting until the US left the gold standard entirely in 1971.72

Choosing to paint this dollar taps into all the controversy around its vintage. Haberle does not represent wealth in this painting; he references class struggle and the instability of signs. The second bill reinforces these themes.

The fifty-cent note is an example of fractional currency (figure 2.14). These were backed by the Federal Government and printed at the Bureau of Engraving and Printing. Fractional currency notes had their genesis during the Civil War, the idea being that paper money might replace coins and thus save metal for the war effort. This bill’s design indicates that it was printed between 1869 and 1875. Their legal status was revoked in 1876, so by the time Haberle painted this image, the note was entirely worthless. Fractional currency notes were known colloquially as shinplasters—people thought of them as bearing so little value even when they had legal status that they might as well serve as bandages instead. Again, Haberle depicted a form of money that lost value and was therefore an unstable cultural sign.73 Haberle’s choice of bills is surely acts as a reproach of the Federal Government’s handling of the national currency system.

Postage stamps are another form of engraved imagery with government backed and exchange value. Haberle includes a blue US one-cent stamp, a tan one-cent Canadian stamp, and three pieces of red US two-cent stamps (figure 2.15). With the exception of the two red stamp


shreds on the lower right, each stamp has been post-marked. A canceled stamp has no further exchange value, nor can it be used to send mail.

Each of these objects, loaded with the signs of monetary value, proves to be worth little or nothing at the time that Haberle painted them. Such a composition does not convey a sense of real wealth, but rather it seems to comment on the instability of these signs to connote monetary value over time. This element of disconnection between apparent value and actual value makes this subject matter a particularly poignant choice for a trompe l’oeil painter. Haberle worked to represent his subject matter with exceptionally exacting and convincing detail, so that his viewers would momentarily feel unsure as to the actual nature of what they saw. He represents but does not present objects, which in turn represent but do not present monetary value—at least not reliably.

The precision with which Haberle depicted these bills also brought his paintings into the broader cultural conversation about counterfeiting. Counterfeit bills also look like money and sometimes have monetary value, depending on the gullibility of the viewer. Both he and Harnett before him were actually visited by Secret Service agents because of their paintings and given warnings to stop representing currency.74

Accuracy of reproduction takes on an extra charge in this instance. For the Bureau of Engraving and Printing, an error in printing cancels the value of the bill. Precision is therefore

74 While multiple authors recount these stories, Staiti, “Con Artists,” 90-103 takes the theme as the central focus of his essay. Harnett dutifully stopped. Haberle did not. Apparently, there were no further consequences to his actions. See also Frankenstein After the Hunt, 82-83. Frankenstein uncovered more government documents pertaining to Harnett’s arrest, one of which is a report from the Solicitor of the Treasury advising the Secret Service Chief Drummond not to prosecute Harnett on the offence. “The painting comes within the spirit of Section 5430, of the R. S. of the United States but does not advise prosecution in this particular case, as evidently no fraud was intended…” I believe we can interpret the conclusion that “no fraud was intended” to mean that Harnett was not using this facsimile of a bill to try to buy goods. Others certainly accused Harnett and Haberle both of fraud for attempting to pass off their paintings as presentations rather than representations of objects. This, fortunately, did not pose a threat to the stability of the US economy.
linked to monetary value. In the hands of counterfeiters, accuracy is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, an accurate enough representation might pass inspection and thus have the desired monetary value. On the other hand, accuracy is also criminal in this context, so the closer counterfeiters got to representing currency, the more risk they incurred. In the realm of painting, we have already established that some elite art critics looked down upon accuracy of representation for being too pedestrian, and thus the whole idea of trompe l’oeil painting failed to impress them. To Haberle’s critics then, *Imitation* demonstrated his ‘criminal’ bad taste.

Currency paintings induced a very particular kind of looking, especially during this era.\(^\text{75}\) Trompe l’oeil paintings, as I have suggested above, prompt viewers to engage with them in a close, slow, and careful way, so that the viewers find themselves emulating the same kind of looking that the painter used in order to create the work. When the subject matter is currency, this kind of looking is amplified. Because of the known prevalence of counterfeited money, many people attempted to equip themselves to be able to recognize the genuine from the false. With books like *Heath’s Improved, Enlarged & Infallible Government Counterfeit Detector at Sight*, viewers in Haberle’s time practiced paying especially close attention to reproductions of currency.\(^\text{76}\) Being presented with what appeared to be a piece of paper currency on display would likely have triggered this skeptical yet scrupulous looking. Of course, such close looking would help the viewer discern that the image was in fact a trompe l’oeil painting and not a piece of money—counterfeit or genuine. However, once that disillusionment had taken place, that same kind of inspectional stance would perfectly position the viewer to notice and appreciate small,

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\(^{75}\) This argument is informed by Leja's assertions about the period eye in *Looking Askance*. He argues that the practice and habit of specific methods of looking can bleed over into other areas of life.

seemingly insignificant details as marvels wrought by hand. Up so close, the differences in medium and making are inescapable.

Such close, careful looking highlights the miniscule particularities of the subject matter. Haberle treats each bill as a unique object, creating portrait-like representations. He encourages an aesthetic appreciation of the physical individuality of the bills, their tears and wrinkles and faded ink. This kind of treatment runs counter to the cultural norm of thinking of bills as bearing no individual worth beyond their denomination. Uniqueness and originality, values highly prized in works of art, run counter to the world of banknote engraving. Although currency is made so that each bill is unique, with its own serial number, this serves as a protection against counterfeiting, not as a marker of individually distinct value, monetary or otherwise.

Appadurai discusses the unique qualities of the physical individual object as the biographical component of the social life of things, and he explains that this mode of valuing is in dynamic tension with the exchange value. The biography of an object is its individual history, its ‘lived-experience.’ This concept is closely aligned to Benjamin’s aura. In Haberle’s painting, both bills bear traces of use. They have torn edges, faded ink, small stains—each scar is a testament to some incident in the individual bill’s past. Haberle uses these qualities to add a narrative dimension to the image. Studying the one-dollar bill, we see the well-worn creases in the bill, suggesting that it had been folded down into a small square and kept that way for some time. We imagine it being carried around in someone’s pocket and changing hands over and over again.

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77 Paying such close attention to signs of physical deterioration on paper items is, I argue, a meaningful characteristic of late nineteenth century American trompe l’oeil painters. This iconographical issue is the focus of chapter 3.

If we were simply looking at printed currency, instead of a painting of it, the wear and tear might detract from the exchange value. What good is an illegible or ripped dollar? In fact, it was only a few decades earlier that the United States began replacing worn-out currency—a system that carries on through today. The Act of March 17, 1862, section 3580, states: “When any United States notes returned to the treasury are so mutilated or otherwise injured as to be unfit for use, the secretary of the treasury is authorized to replace the same with others of the same character and amounts.” According to Tom Serfass, numismatics historian and curator, paper currency in the 1870s and 1880s consisted of approximately 75% paper and 25% cotton, a mix that did not have high durability. Bills made at this time might be in circulation for 2-3 years and undergo 800-1000 passes. By this standard, the greenback—the bill with the potential to be the newest note in the composition, printed between 1869 and 1875, would be well beyond the typical end of its tenure in 1887.

If printed paper currency potentially lost value with age, both physically and politically, Haberle’s painting would presumably age much more gracefully. In basic terms, Haberle translated the image from its print materials of ink on paper into the painting materials of oil paint on canvas. The social norms for handling these two media greatly affect their longevity. While we generally do not hesitate to touch printed pages, we have been trained not to touch paintings—especially framed paintings. This convention of cautious handling of paintings in turn reflects their established role as bearers of social status as well as personal and cultural

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79 Conversation with author, 12-7-2016. At the time, Serfass was the curator of the Newman Money Museum at Washington University in St. Louis.

80 The strong tactile appeal of trompe l’oeil paintings is remarkable because it sometimes overpowers this social norm. Indeed, Audrey Lewis, a curator of the Brandywine River Museum of Art, informed me that the trompe l’oeil paintings in their collection need more conservation due to visitors’ tendency to touch them. Even accounting for this damage, paintings of money long outlive the paper bills. Conversation with Lewis on July 29, 2016.
legacy. While the painting may go in and out of style, fluctuating in exchange value in auction settings, the particular bills that Haberle chose to depict were already largely worthless at the time he painted them, many of them no longer in circulation.

Haberle’s *Imitation* sold for $350 in 1887, a price that suggests the painting is worth more than 200 times the value of the currency it represents (if all the currency in the painting were valid, it would equal $1.60).\(^81\) This was a very good price for Haberle, who was at the beginning of his fine arts career. In today’s economy (2019), the price is equivalent to $8,637.18. Thomas Clarke, the purchaser, paid for an original artistic production in a medium that conveyed his elite status.\(^82\) The painting is a unique object made entirely by hand by just one person, not by machine or factory labor. As we see playing out nearly simultaneously in the Arts and Crafts movement, this type of production was thought to be intrinsically better on multiple levels: material, spiritual/psychological, and socio-political.\(^83\)

Haberle’s *Imitation* compels its viewers to weigh carefully the differences in cultural and fiscal value between painting and print, ensuring that painting comes out on top. Additionally, through his process of media translation, Haberle appropriates and amplifies the aesthetic appeal

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\(^81\) There are several coins in the composition. Above the bills is a Connecticut Copper, a one-cent piece minted between 1785-88, so after the Revolutionary War, but before the ratification of the Constitutions. They bear the portrait of King George III. The two other coins on the left of the painting are actually just two sides of the same type of coin, a three-cent piece made prior to 1873. The upper coin that appears to be copper is actually just dirty as these coins were minted in silver. Looking very closely, we can see an ornate letter C circumscribing the Roman numeral for 3, indicating the value of the coin. The lower coin shows the opposite side, where we can see a six-pointed star surrounding a shield, and the words United States of America and the vintage 1853.

\(^82\) Sill, *John Haberle*, 16.

of his printed subject matter. Currency paintings instruct viewers to engage with them visually in multiple distinct way: skeptically searching for signs of counterfeit, aesthetically appreciating the detailed pattern of line work, and aesthetically appreciating the work as a painting. These overlapping visual impulses create a heightened experience for viewers.

In the lower left corner of the painting, the tintype portrait of the bearded man appears to be wedged into the painted frame (figure 2.16). This portrait, like the portraits of Washington and other historical figures, conveys authority, but of a different kind. It is a self-portrait of the artist himself. Through it, Haberle guarantees the painting’s value on the basis of his authorship and artistic reputation. The presence of self-portrait also signals Haberle’s self-awareness of his artistic authority to shape viewer experience.

**Haberle, *A Bachelor's Drawer***

Haberle’s photographic self-portraits, usually tintypes, appear in a number of his paintings, including *A Bachelor's Drawer*, which Haberle started in 1890 and completed in 1894 (figure 1.1). It is an ideal locus for our investigation of the iconography of photographs within trompe l’oeil paintings because it depicts not one but six photographs. *A Bachelor’s Drawer* represents the front of a wooden drawer, pasted over with an idiosyncratic selection of ephemera and small objects. These collected tidbits suggest the pleasures of the life of a bachelor threatened by the prospect of fatherhood, here represented by a baby-naming pamphlet. The humorous tone of the painting is underscored and nuanced by the specific cultural associations that adhere to the media of the printed images and photographs.84 While these associations need

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84 For an investigation of Haberle’s use of humor in his paintings, see Greenhill, *Playing It Straight*, 139–63.
to be recovered for today’s viewers, Haberle’s audience would have read the coded language of medium with ease.

In the lower right quadrant of the painting, we see a cluster of photographs (figure 1.8). A tintype portrait of Haberle himself is painted to appear as if it is resting on the painting’s frame. Behind and above the tintype is a larger photograph of a nude woman, and this photograph in turn overlaps four “cigarette” photographs featuring a portrait of a woman in a black hat, a crying baby strapped to a highchair, a woman in a long white dress with puffed sleeves, and another woman in a dancer’s leotard. These six photographs display a range of formats and functions for photography, each with its own unique cultural associations. Haberle, having appropriated them, cleverly plays these associations against the connotations of painting. Further, by daring to use popular visual culture as subject matter, Haberle proposes a new relationship between elite and popular culture—dialectical rather than derivative.

The tintype portrait we encounter here is Haberle in a portrait bust format, similar to the tintype in *Imitation* (figure 2.17). Its standard framing crops him at mid chest so that his face is about two-thirds of the way up the composition. In *Imitation*, the photographed Haberle looks the part of the serious artist. He wears a respectable dark suit and small spectacles. He gives us a three-quarters view of his profile and gazes pensively out into the middle distance. His full dark beard seems to further frame the upper part of his face and high forehead, highlighting his intelligence.

The tintype in *A Bachelor’s Drawer* conveys a very different message about the character of the artist. Despite its conformity to the portrait format, what we see in this image is the artist’s individuality, even his quirkiness. In this portrait, his eyes look upward, avoiding our gaze. With his eyebrows raised and the hint of a smile, he looks slightly sheepish. The Haberle we see here
is a voyeur, and the object of his illicit gaze seems to be the picture of the nude woman just above the tintype. Haberle the painter playfully implies a direct dialogue between these two images (figure 2.18).

By comparing the two tintypes, we get a sense of this particular form of photography. Tintypes were small, cheap pictures that could be made quickly. A tintype, or ferrotype, is a direct process, so it produces just one picture, like a daguerreotype, without an intermediary negative. A thin piece of iron (not tin) is coated with a dark lacquer and then coated with a collodion photograph emulsion. The emulsion, when exposed to light, becomes opaque and appears lighter relative to the dark lacquered layer and so creates a positive image. In this format, the image did not need to expose for long, so, all told, a person could sit for a photograph and have the result within ten minutes. Tintypes were a form of studio photography. This, however, did not ensure a professional level of quality. Many tintypes have irregularly angled edges, evidence of hasty and careless work. The sitters seemed to take a similarly casual attitude towards the process, using tintypes to experiment with different poses and looks.

This informality reflects the shifting cultural attitudes around portrait photography. When photographic portraits first became available in the 1840s, viewers reacted with awe and excitement.\(^5\) Walt Whitman captures that spirit with his account of visiting a photography

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\(^5\) Very soon after its European inventions, photography came to America in the form of the daguerreotype, transported by American painter and inventor Samuel Morse (1791-1872) by 1840. This form of photography fixes a positive image on a highly polished silver surface without using a negative, so it produces only a single image for each exposure. Despite this limitation, daguerreotypes were extremely popular through the early 1850s, especially for portraits. A proliferation of studios and itinerate photographers disseminated the technology far and wide, and the distinctive, extremely crisp aesthetic of daguerreotypes set people’s expectations and associations with photography long after this particular process went out of vogue. For Samuel F. B. Morse’s early remarks on the topic of photography, see the reproduction of his speech at the National Academy of Design Annual Dinner, April 24, 1840, printed in *American Art to 1900*, eds. Burns and Davis, 390–91. For essays on the early history of photography in America, see Martha Sandweiss, ed., *Photography in Nineteenth-Century America* (Fort Worth, TX: New York: Harry N Abrams Inc, 1991). For a recent and encyclopedic account of the history of photography beyond America, see Mary Warner Marien, *Photography: A Cultural History* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2011). For insight into the diversity of the early photographic industry and a case study of a
studio. “What a spectacle! In whatever direction you turn your peering gaze, you see naught but human faces! There they stretch, from floor to ceiling—hundreds of them. Ah! What tales might those pictures tell if their mute lips had the power of speech!”

A writer for *Godey’s Lady’s Book* in 1849 glowingly reported how photographs, daguerreotypes in this instance, were prized at home: “It is hard to find the man who […] has not the shadowy face of his wife and children done up in purple morocco and velvet, together or singly, among his household treasures.”

A dozen years later, however, according to Oliver Wendell Holmes, photographic portraits no longer elicited wonder and reverence. “These miracles are being worked all around us so easily and so cheaply that most people have ceased to think of them as marvels.” Once the initial awe surrounding photography faded, greater playfulness could permeate the medium.

If the tintype Haberle is a voyeur, looking at a dirty picture, he is simultaneously an artist looking at a nude model. This photograph reveals not only the woman’s body but also the fraught nature of the nude in American art. The picture shows a nude woman posed somewhat stiffly with her arms up behind her head and her face in profile. While there is a tacit acknowledgment of the viewers’ gaze in the pose’s artificiality, the figure is not overtly erotic.

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beyond her nudity. The band of paper that crosses over the photograph, covering the figure’s genitals, both censors the image and amplifies its indecency.

As a student, Haberle initially aspired to be a figure painter. His sketchbooks from this period depict nudes drawn from both plaster casts and from life. While men were trained to draw the nude in art school, naked figures were risky subject matter for finished works of art in the nineteenth century. From the cool and prudish reception of Vanderlyn’s *Ariadne*, 1809-1814, to the complaints of vulgarity surrounding American nudes displayed at the Columbian Exposition of 1893, the nude figure was controversial for American artists. Haberle’s painting of the nude photo, with its censor bar and titillated surrogate viewer (the tintype), seems to self-consciously mock the taboo nature of the subject matter and its distinct treatment in photography and painting. Haberle wryly suggests that while Americans might object to paintings of nudes, photographs of naked women found avid if covert consumers.

Photographs of nudes were especially problematic, both in America and even in Europe, where nude painting was accepted. The viewing conditions of photographs made them seem more pornographic. Large-scale nude painting on display in a public gallery were an example of fine art, to be viewed and discussed in groups of sophisticates. Small, hand-held photographs were looked at individually, in private, and so seemed more like something unsavory to be

89 For more on Haberle’s early training, see Sill, *John Haberle*, 9-13.


hidden away. Further, with the sharp focus of photography, the details of the naked body tended to be much more graphic than the soft, idealizing brushwork of academic painters.\(^9^2\)

And yet, nude photographs were extremely useful for artists. Pictures made specifically for this purpose could supply the painter with a model if he or she could not afford to hire one.\(^9^3\) In this way, Haberle was like so many other painters of his time, working from photographic models. He differed, however, in maintaining the trappings of the photographic format. This is an essential difference. It makes the relationship between photography and painting a prominent subject of the painting.

Above and behind the nude photo, there are the additional four medium scaled photographs (figure 2.19).\(^9^4\) This format of pictures commonly came with cigarette packages at the time, like a prize in a cereal box.\(^9^5\) Unlike the other two photographs, these were not pictures that one sought out intentionally. Rather, such images came along with the main object for consumption. The smoker might enjoy a few moments of entertainment or titillation with the card that came with the pack and then discard it, keeping only the ones that spoke to him or her especially. These photographs do not represent a relationship, just a consumer transaction.\(^9^6\) They were impersonal and highly dispensable.


\(^{94}\) The crying baby at the center of the group has some cartoonish qualities; it might represent a photographic reproduction of a satirical print rather than a direct photograph of a baby. I will refer to it along with the rest of the group as a photograph.


From the invention of photography through the end of the century, artists and critics debated whether photography would act as a “handmaiden of art” or bring about the death of painting. Articles from Haberle’s time typically argued that painting and photography could coexist, but the frequency and tone with which they insisted on this point implies that many readers were unsure. In a letter to the editor of *Art Amateur* in 1889, an aspiring artist wrote that he thought photography might be a useful tool but was hesitant because “there are some who think that if you have a camera in the house that it is a blot on all your work.” The writer feared being “branded as dishonest.” Another reader wrote in who had been trying to learn if various artists used photography in their painting processes. When the reader asked artists directly, they often seemed insulted. The editor replied exasperatedly, “We may say once more, however, that photography is used to a considerable extent by many artists of undoubted ability.” The editor continued, “No artist, though, should feel offended at being asked if he makes use of photography, unless the question is put in such a form as to be equivalent to a hint that he could not get on without it.”

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98 The articles referenced here were all published in the *Art Amateur*, which, according to Frank Luther Mott, had one of the largest circulations of fine arts periodicals during the 1880s and 90s, with a circulation of over 10,000 copies. The publication dealt in art criticism, tips for amateur artists in all media, and tips for the selection and placement of art in the home. It was published in New York and also had a London edition. See Mott, *A History of American Magazines* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard university press, 1930), vol. III, 185, 191. See also vol. IV, 146.


Other articles described instances when photography was used inappropriately. Some portrait painters photographed their sitters, printed a photograph of the desired size, and traced the face onto the canvas. One author described this practice as “working like an artisan and not like an artist.” Another article decried the many bad portraits that were produced by combining photography and painting. “Many life-size portraits are now done in oils, but the majority are exceedingly hard, and anything but artistic. Many of the enlargements are traced upon canvas and then painted; others are glued to the canvas, and painted ‘according to order,’ and from the photographer’s ‘directions.’ The features may resemble the original, but the painting cannot do so.”

Haberle’s use of photographs as subject matter is again something different. He did not incorporate the figures from the photographs into his painting as if they were his own observations. Because he presented these images as photographs, he cannot be charged with dishonesty on that count. Indeed, he seems to have been one of the types of artists described above, who felt insulted that people should think he used photographic aids and that he somehow cheated. In a letter to W.M.R. French, the director of the Art Institute of Chicago, Haberle defended a different painting of his on display there in 1888. “I can only say that it was painted as any artists would (or ought to) paint a picture. This picture was painted entirely with the brush in oil colors—with the naked eye—without any photographic aid as many may think.”


102 “Painting Photographs in Oil,” The Art Amateur 7, 3 (August 1882), 52. ProQuest.

103 Letter reproduced in Sill, John Haberle, 23.
freehand, Haberle paradoxically seems to claim the skill of painting like a camera, but without
the use of a camera.

The *Art Amateur* ran an article in 1893 on how the invention of the camera has affected
and would continue to affect art. Explaining the perspective of English artist Walter Crane, the
article reports, “He also believes that in the long run the camera will do good service in defining
the essential difference between imitative and inventive art.” This follows the general fine art
sentiment that since the camera could imitate appearances so accurately, if painting was to
survive, it must find something else to do. Haberle and other trompe l’oeil painters challenged
this view, and by depicting the very things that were supposed to threaten their livelihood, they
were able to show their viewers their perspective: that painting as medium held enduring cultural
value.

Critics often compared trompe l’oeil painting to photography, which, depending on the
critic was meant either as a compliment or an insult. A praise-laden obituary notice for Harnett
from 1892 remarked that he “copied in oil with the accuracy of a camera.” A reviewer of one
of John Peto’s paintings described his depiction of a newspaper, the *Clermont Courier*, as
follows: “The copy of the Courier, which was the most conspicuous object in the display, was a
perfect photograph of the paper, and was complete in every detail.” The author described Peto’s
painting metaphorically as a photograph, revealing significant slippage between media.}

Haberle referred to himself as a painter of “artistic mechanics.”

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105 “Artist Harnett Dead,” unidentified newspaper clipping in “Blemly Scrapbook,” 98.
106 “Premium Picture.” Newspaper clipping in John Frederick Peto and Peto family papers, circa 1850-1983, Box 1,
peto-and-peto-family-papers-11165/series-3/box-1-folder-16
highly charged, and many used it as an antonym to art. Photography was accused of being too mechanical to be art. Mr. Wyles, a defender of photography as a form of art, retorted that all art is mechanical to some extent. The Art Amateur author of the article quoting Mr. Wyles realized the ambiguity around the term “mechanical” and attempted to clarify the matter.

“When Mr. Wyles says—by inference at least—that all art must be expressed by mechanical aids he does not seem to recognize the very obvious difference between the mechanical aid of a pencil, brush, or chisel, which can only be mechanical in the most limited sense—for in every line it produces it is guided by the intelligence of the designer—and the mechanical aid of the sun which produces a ready-made picture which no effort of the mind or body of the operator could possibly change in the most trifling detail.”

This same insult, of being too mechanical to be art, was aimed at chromolithography as well, as noted in the discussion on Tuchfarber’s Old Violin print. But, photography would go on to be accepted as a fine art form, not in small part due to the efforts of the Pictorialists, just a few years later in the 1890s.

When Haberle referred to his work as artistic mechanics, he meant to boast of the machine-like skill of his hand. In the age of increasing mechanization of labor, Haberle, strove to show that humans could rival machines in the task of representation. Artists like George Inness were unconvinced that this was a valuable accomplishment. “Imitation is worthless. Photography

108 Emily Dana Shapiro essay on the 1899 painting The Clock Maker, by J. D. Chalfant--an artist who made several trompe l'oeil paintings earlier in the century--investigates many of the same tensions between cultural nostalgia for pre-industrial labor practices and the embrace of factory and mechanized work. She explores the parallels between artistic and artisanal labor. See Shapiro, “J. D. Chalfant’s Clock Maker: The Image of the Artisan in a Mechanized Age,” American Art 19, no. 3 (2005): 40–59, https://doi.org/10.1086/500231.

109 “Photography and Art,” The Art Amateur 4, 4 (March 1881), 68. ProQuest.

does it much better than you or I could.” Inness and the Tonalists chose to respond to the inventions of photography and the prevalence of printed images by moving away from mimesis. In doing so, they opted out of the discussion.

The associations that enliven the six photographs represented in Haberle’s painting range from playful to lascivious to cheap—all capture a kind of immediacy fitting the fast production and consumption of new visual media. These are hardly the kinds of descriptors traditionally associated with paintings, however. I posit that Haberle included these image forms from popular culture to speak to people who would have traditionally been excluded by the fine art establishment. If tintypes and cigarette cards were ubiquitous and accessible forms of imagery, paintings were not. By including these image-bearing objects in his painting, Haberle gave a much broader group of people a way into the painting. He was able to replicate the pleasure that upper class connoisseurs might have felt, for instance, in spotting an allusion to the Belvedere torso, but at the middle-class level—speaking in a coded visual language in which they were already fluent.

**Peto, Bowie Knife, Keyed Bugle and Canteen and Peto, Rack Picture**

“Moreover, photography is the translator, disseminator, and preserver of art. It gives us the old masters, the relics of antiquity, the crumbling monuments of Greece in all but color…”

John Haberle’s *Imitation* and *A Bachelor’s Drawer* treated photographs as subject matter. In doing so, Haberle alluded to the controversial practice of painting from photographs. By studying John F. Peto’s *Bowie Knife, Keyed Bugle and Canteen*, ca. 1890 and *Rack Picture*, 1887, I investigate another connection between painting and photography: the use of

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photography to document and disseminate paintings (figures 2.20 & 2.1). Both paintings depict photographs of other paintings. As the images they portrayed moved through layers of media translation, each medium affected their meaning. Peto’s paintings sensitively capture the images’ acquired connotations.

Even painters who otherwise opposed the use of photography in conjunction with painting justified its use in documenting other works of art. Since the invention of photography, artists used it to make records of their work. George Caleb Bingham, antebellum painter of the American frontier, hired a daguerreotypist to take pictures of his paintings in the late 1840s (figure 2.21). This allowed him to look back at prior compositions and show the daguerreotypes to potential patrons. Since daguerreotypes are singular images, made directly without negatives, these photographs could only provide a one-to-one substitute for paintings, not a means for mass distribution. Lilly Martin Spencer, an American painter of genre scenes, especially prized the multiplying capability of later photographic processes. In the late 1870s, she sold photographic copies of her painting *Truth Unveiling Falsehood* for $50 each (figure 2.22). Spencer had long worked with print publishers to distribute lithographs after her paintings—a process that she came to believe shortchanged the painter. She attempted to take matters into her own hands by offering photographic copies direct to consumers.¹¹³ French post-impressionist painter Paul Gauguin, working at the same time at Peto, used photography to show his work to his agent in Paris when he was working elsewhere. Gauguin also spoke warmly of his collection of

photographs and prints of artwork by other artists as his mobile gallery. His collection of reproductions gave him inspiration.\footnote{For Gauguin’s uses of photography, see Elizabeth C. Childs, “Paradise Redux: Gauguin, Photography, and Fin-de-Siècle Tahiti,” in \textit{The Artist and the Camera: Degas to Picasso}, by Dorothy M. Kosinski (Dallas: New Haven; Dallas Museum of Art; Distributed by Yale University Press, 1999), 116–41.}

Institutions as well as individuals desired photographs of paintings. Museums commissioned photographs of their collections to preserve a record and to sell albums of their collections, the predecessor of the twentieth century’s museum catalogue. Other collectors sometimes sought photographs as a way to supplement their collections with works they could not personally own.\footnote{Font-Réaulx, \textit{Painting and Photography}, 93–94.}

Unlike Harnett or Haberle, Peto was a photographer.\footnote{Wilmerding, \textit{Important Information Inside}, 15–16.} Peto’s archives include dozens of photographs of his family and friends, posing for portraits and genre scenes, and also photographs of his house and studio (figure 2.23). He also took photographs of his own artworks (figures 2.24). We know he owned other photographs of paintings from the evidence presented in his paintings. Peto’s range of experiences with photography gave him a keen sense of the uses and limits of the medium.

\textit{Bowie Knife, Keyed Bugle and Canteen} and \textit{Rack Picture} exemplify two of Peto’s favored compositional formats: the former resembles a wooden door with objects fixed to it, and the latter looks like a letter rack—a grid-like configuration of ribbon tacked to the wall, which also supports various objects. In each case, we recognize the photograph of a painting as one of the suspended objects. Judging only by looking at Peto’s paintings, it would be difficult to tell if the photographs represent life or other works of art, or if they are even photographs at all. They
could easily be mistaken for prints. The monochrome color palette and the mounting leave much uncertain. I resolved this ambiguity by identifying the photographic referents and the paintings they portray.

In Peto’s *Bowie Knife, Keyed Bugle and Canteen*, we see a dark green door with the titular objects hanging from nails, partially obscuring several paper objects pasted or tacked to the door. Here we encounter the photograph of another painting: it is an outdoor scene, showing a building with several figures milling around in front of it—one on a horse. Peto’s painting is unfinished, which is especially apparent in this portion of the composition. Several of the figures are only outlines or blobs of white in approximate human form, yet to be clearly defined. From this limited evidence, it would be impossible to know the medium or the subject matter of the image within the painting.

Fortunately, we do have the referent image.\(^{117}\) It is indeed a photograph of a painting (figure 2.25). Close looking at the photograph revealed minute brush strokes and canvas weave texture. It also revealed a distorted signature, one I deciphered as Edward Moran, brother to Thomas Moran, the more enduringly famous Western landscape painter (figure 2.26). Next to his name, Moran wrote the year 1865. The subject of Moran’s painting is written on the front of the building—the Union Volunteer Refreshment Saloon. Another Moran brother, John, was the photographer, and Harris Printers printed the photograph in 1866.\(^{118}\)

In Peto’s 1887 *Rack Picture*, we see a letter rack: a geometric lattice of pale red ribbon tacked to a dark green wall. Several items fit snuggly into the ribbon riggings, most importantly a

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\(^{117}\) An intrepid member of the Peto Foundation, Harry Brown, found the photograph among Peto’s belongings in his old home and studio—now the John F. Peto Studio Museum, Island Heights, NJ.

\(^{118}\) This information is printed on a sheet that accompanies the photograph. A copy of both the photograph and this sheet are in the Independence Seaport Museum, Philadelphia.
cabinet card style photograph of a man with wild hair and a cravat. This too is a photograph of a painting, a portrait of Beethoven made by German artist Carl Jäger in 1870 (figure 2.27). Friedrich Bruckmann Publishers issued the photograph in multiple contexts and formats; it circulated widely in both Europe and the US.

Peto appropriated the work of the painters: Carl Jäger and Edward Moran; and also the photographers: Friedrich Bruckmann and John Moran. Peto did not leave a written record of his motivation. What does the painting itself tell us about photography? How much is it about emulating or competing with Jäger and Moran, who were both more successful artists? There is no evidence to suggest that Peto would have known Jäger beyond his portraits of composers. Edward Moran, however, was active in the Philadelphia area, so Peto might conceivably have met him personally, in addition to admiring his work. If it were the case that Peto appropriated these images to compete with or honor the painters, it would have made more sense to copy the paintings directly, rather than reproducing their reproductions. We must assume that a larger part of his motivation stemmed from interest in the subject matter as photographs of paintings, and a recognition that the photographic mediation mattered.

Edward Moran made this painting on commission as part of a series for the Union Volunteer Refreshment Saloon [UVRS], a grass-roots establishment in Philadelphia that worked to support the many Union soldiers that passed through or were stationed there. They offered sleeping quarters, food, social events, and medical attention. Moran’s paintings are remarkably well documented, with correspondence, receipts, and certificates of authenticity preserved in the Pennsylvania Historic Society.119

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A certificate of authenticity, signed by multiple members of the Committee of the Union Volunteer Refreshment Saloon, as well as by the artist, certifies that the series of paintings was perfectly truthful and historical, based on sketches done on the spot, and corrected by photographs. Moran portrays a scene set in 1861, documenting the early days of the Saloon, which he painted in 1865. Photographs ensured its historical correctness, supplying, amongst other things, the likenesses of people who had since passed away. Members of the board signed their assurance that this painting was “an original by M. Edward Moran, artist, we having witnessed its progress from its incipient state to its completion in the said E Moran’s Studio; that it gives an honest and truthful delineation of our Saloon and neighbourhood [sic], and it faithfully represents some of the many and varied scenes enacted there during this most unholy Rebellion.” The document goes on to describe the painting as “perfectly satisfactory and Historical.” Moran himself refers to his painting as “a true copy of the Saloon and the neighborhood.” While the location of the original painting is unknown, another painting in the series is now in the Independence Seaport Museum collection and presumably has much in common in terms of style and execution (figure 2.28).

Why would the Committee of the UVRS choose to commission a painting rather than a photograph, if it so highly prized accuracy and truthful delineation? The obvious answer is that they sought to preserve a moment that had already past, and so no real-world referents existed to populate the image. Painting, unlike photography, was not reliant upon current presence of the object or people to be depicted. Imagination and memory could rekindle and capture a version of

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120 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981). Barthes explores the complex relationships between photography and death, in particular its limited ability to ‘bring back to life’ someone who has died; see pp. 92-99. On photography as authenticating or verifying the existence of a real-world referent, which Barthes refers to as “what has been,” see pp. 76-77 and 85-89.

121 Fales Collection, series 3, boxes 11 & 12.
history, something that is beyond the limits of photography’s indelibility.\footnote{On the combination of painting and photography in attempts to perform an imaginative resurrection of things or people passed, and the essential role of painting in this reanimating endeavor, see Miller, “\textit{Death and Resurrection},” 84-95.} The building, too, was slated for demolition in 1865.\footnote{A newspaper clipping titled “A Fine Photograph” likely from \textit{The Evening Bulletin} September 4, 1865, describes the UVRS as “this famous institution, which will soon be numbered with the things of the past.” See the Fales Collection, series 3, boxes 11 & 12. The collection also contains a typed and printed poem, undated, “Lines in Memory of the Philadelphia Volunteer Refreshment Saloon. Suggested by its ruins.” It seems likely that the building was demolished on or soon after 1865.} To recreate this historical moment, and to commemorate it with the most prestige, they turned to painting. By commissioning an oil painting of a historical event, the Committee assured the loftiest possible connotations for their organization—which, following the end of the Civil War, was also facing imminent disbanding. They commissioned a history painting, which was traditionally the most valued genre of painting. For the Committee, this painting was a self-conscious attempt to preserve a place in history for their work and their institution.

A journalist from \textit{The Evening Bulletin} discussed another of Moran’s paintings within the same series and revealed a further value to the commissioned paintings: their artistry. According to the article, Moran’s painting “preserved that famous institution” by way of his “photographic fidelity.” The painting, however, served as more than a factual document—it was a work of art. “As an enduring memento of a most interesting feature of the war, the painting possesses rare historic value; and as a work of art, Mr. Moran has achieved wonders by skillful grouping and artistic use of his colors in the treatment of a subject which in the hands of any but an artist would have become tame and common-place.”\footnote{“An Interesting Picture.” \textit{Evening Bulletin}, October 28, 1865. Clipping in Fales Collection.} A true artist, we learn, can lend interest, excitement, and affect to a scene that might not speak so eloquently of itself without the artist’s
intervention. This article gives us a sense of an almost mechanical accuracy and that deeper sense of truth that Inness and others so treasured. Since the painting that inspired the photograph in Peto’s painting has since been lost, we can only assume that it possessed the same combination of accuracy and artistry.

When John Moran photographed his brother’s painting, the image changed aesthetically and functionally. The photograph shrunk the picture down in size, flattened out the surface texture, and translated the colors into gray scale. The decrease in scale also decreased legibility. The figures became smaller, as did the words written on the building. However, it was more portable, and so the photograph could serve as a memento of the painting itself. Photographs of works of art would typically be kept in albums, not framed and put up on the wall. These were images for study, rather than decoration.

While the physical surface of the photograph is smooth, we can tell from the way it captures the light hitting the canvas, that the painting itself had visible facture. The photograph records the traces of the artist’s hand but drains the painting of the sensual appeal of the brushwork. A photograph cannot replicate the interactive experience of standing in front of a painting, for instance: the way the brushwork catches the light, flitting across the surface and enlivening the material in response to the viewer’s subtle movements.

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125 As I cannot directly contrast the photograph to the painting, my comparison here relies on the accuracy of the written descriptions in the archive and a presumed similarity between our picture and the one in the Independence Seaport Museum.

In considering this photograph of Moran’s history painting, we must also include photography’s associations with fact, with truth.\footnote{Mia Fineman explores this topic in \textit{Faking It: Manipulated Photography before Photoshop} (New York; New Haven: Metropolitan Museum of Art; Distributed by Yale University Press, 2012), 3-43.} We know that assertions of using photographs to inform aspects of the painting bolstered its claims to historical accuracy, through the indexicality of photography. Was photography’s ‘truth value’ so powerful that it might influence how people viewed photographs of paintings? Is a photograph of a painting of a historical event rendered more credible than the painting itself? It is worth pondering to what extent the medium of photography might have lent credence to the image, so that it read as more documentary than artistic.

This photograph of Moran’s painting, despite these losses, does clearly preserve the composition and much of the detail. There is only one painting, but there can be countless photographic reproductions. This photograph could serve the dual purpose as reminding the viewer of the painting itself as well as of the historical event. The audience for copies of this photograph might then have included people who admired the painting or Moran’s work generally, people who had some connection to the UVRS, and also people interested in the history of the Civil War. The democratic nature of photography outstrips the painting, and, as such, is perhaps more appropriate to the subject matter: a grass-roots organization dedicated to serving the many rather than the few.

Returning to \textit{Bowie Knife, Keyed Bugle and Canteen}, the image changes again when Peto translates the photograph back into paint. It is another step removed from Moran’s painting. We lose any sense of Moran’s brushwork; now we have Peto’s. As I noted earlier, this portion of Peto’s painting is unfinished, so we see outlines and blocked in shapes in different shades of
The people, setting, and event are all ambiguous—no longer defining a historic moment, heroic, artistic, or otherwise. We can only assume, based on the meticulous finish of Peto’s completed paintings, that this would not have been the case once he put the finishing touches on this picture.

We do know that even if he had completed the painting, we still would not have a full sense of the photograph of Moran’s painting because of how it fits into the larger composition. Peto placed the photograph behind several other objects so that most of the right side is obscured. This cropping omits most of the area where the words appear on the building, many of the figures, and also the large tree. These changes suggest a distinct function for the image in this larger, painted context. Placed on a door, as part of a collection of other objects, the photograph loses the connotations of an object for focused study that it might have if it were in an album instead. If it were fully visible on the door, it might indicate more prolonged study, but as it is only partially visible, it can only act as a reminder. As other objects cover over the photograph, they take physical and mental precedence over the picture.

A bowie knife, a blue notebook, a powder flask, and a bugle string interrupt the photograph. They re-contextualize the image as one of several memorabilia items related to the Civil War. Peto added signs of deterioration to the photograph’s mounting—the small rips and the dog-eared corner. The version of the photograph found in his possessions is stained, but the mounting remains whole. The physical decay of the photograph’s mounting reinforces the historical distance of the event and of the painting itself. We imagine the aging veteran who would have owned these things.\textsuperscript{128} The photograph could represent a stay at the Saloon and much

\textsuperscript{128} Peto’s father was a Civil War veteran of the Union Army; see Frankenstein, \textit{After the Hunt}, 107. For further speculation on Peto’s references to the Civil War, see John Wilmerding, ”Images of Lincoln in Peto’s Late Paintings,” \textit{Archives of American Art Journal} 22, no. 2 (January 1, 1982): 3–12, https://doi.org/10.1086/aaa.22.2.1557400.
needed hospitality received. The photograph conveys a type of ownership of the place based in experience—an experience shared by the many soldiers who passed through the Saloon. In this way, the photograph conveys the common man’s experience better than Moran’s painting. By painting the picture, by making it once again unique, Peto made this broadly accessible sensibility the subject of fine art.

Peto’s remediation of a photograph, like Haberle’s, invites viewers to contrast photography and painting. Photographs, because of the way they are made using chemical reactions to light reflecting off of a subject rather than manual approximations of human vision, seem to offer a transparent or unmediated visual experience. However, the lifelike color and scale of the painting which envelopes the depicted photograph, in combination with the way elements of the painting seem to project into the viewer’s space, create a sense of immediacy, tactility, and intimacy unmatched by photography. Painting a photograph of a painting reminds viewers of the rewards of engaging directly with paintings while acknowledging the documentary and memory functions of photography.

Switching now to Peto’s Rack Picture, we trace the distinct journey of Jäger’s painting of Beethoven through its different steps of media translation. Jäger created the portrait in 1870. It has since been lost. Friedrich Bruckmann, a photographer and publisher, commissioned the painting as part of a larger series of portraits of German composers.129 We can learn a great deal about the portrait of Beethoven from other surviving paintings from this same series, portraits of Schubert and Bach (figures 2.29 & 2.30). The similarities in the formats of these two portraits suggest that Jäger maintained a uniform approach throughout the series. He made both portraits

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with oil on canvas, using a severely limited palette of white, black, and a burnt sienna hue. The warmth of the sienna gives some life to the composers, and the limited palette anticipates their translation into photographs, ensuring minimal distortion. They both measure 25 5/8 x 18 1/8 inches, which is large enough for the subjects to be life sized, and yet still modest. Jäger created his portrait of Beethoven from other extant portraits. As Beethoven died prior to the invention of photography, no photographs were available to ensure its accuracy. In addition to the other portraits, Jäger used his imagination to create an image of the composer that would fit the reputation that grew around him after his death, as the quintessential romantic genius.

Bruckmann commissioned this painting to be reproduced in his book project, *Gallerie Deutscher Tondichter*, or Gallery of German Composers. Each photograph of a painting would be contextualized by text specific to the image, as well as by the rest of the book. The painting itself was never supposed to be a precious singular image, or at least this was not its primary purpose. Its existence as a painting was merely a step to the larger goal, which was to create the series of photographs and to publish the book.

Friedrich Bruckmann published *Gallerie Deutscher Tondichter* with text by Eduard Hanslick in Munich in 1870. Bruckmann simultaneously published cartes-de-visite of Jäger’s portraits in both Munich and London (figure 2.31). Soon after, Stroefer and Kirchner published a book in New York called the *Gallery of German Composers*, with text in English by Edward F. Rimbault and featuring the same photographs. The text is entirely different, not a translation from German to English.¹³⁰

¹³⁰ Hanslick, *Gallerie Deutscher Tondichter* (München: F. Bruckmann, 1870); Rimbault, *Gallery of German Composers* (New York: Stroefer & Kirchner, 1873). This same English text appears in a book called *Gallery of Great Composers*, this one with heliographs of steel engravings after Jäger’s paintings. This was published in Boston by James R. Osgood and Co. in 1874 and reissued several times over.
When we encounter Jäger’s portrait of Beethoven in either of these books, the context strongly shapes our perception. The rich tooled leather covers convey the value of these books as luxury items that contain precious information. In both books, the photograph of Beethoven is surrounded by blank pages on either side to protect the image, and it prefaces a biographical text. Beethoven’s section is sandwiched between Mozart and Schubert.\(^{131}\) Rimbault, the author of the English text, meditated on the special relationship between portraits and biography. He asserted that a well-done portrait, one that is engaging and conveys a sense of character and soul as well as physical likeness, should motivate the viewer to want to know more about the person’s life. The two sources of knowledge—visual and textual—are mutually encouraging, he stated, as knowing something about the life of the subject makes the portrait infinitely more compelling.\(^{132}\)

If the photograph as part of a book had the connotation of leisured individual study, the photograph as a carte de visite connotes less preciousness and more sociality. These cards were meant to be handled, to be traded or kept in photo albums. Photography historian Elizabeth Siegel described the album format as particularly suited to personalization in organization, and it anticipates owners telling their own narratives as they show these albums to friends and guests. In studying this format, Siegel noted that many album makers interspersed famous people with portraits of their own family and friends.\(^{133}\) A carte de visite’s size and standardized format made it easy to re-contextualize.

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\(^{132}\) Rimbault, *Gallery of German Composers*, v–viii.

Returning to Peto’s Rack Picture, we see the photograph, here in cabinet card size, transformed back into a painting. Peto’s brushwork, looser and more obvious than Haberle’s or Harnett’s, replaces the traces of Jäger’s hand. Peto also gives the image new proportions and cropping, indicating that he did not trace the photograph.

Unlike Bowie Knife where the overwhelming theme is Civil War, we do not get a clear new theme to re-contextualize the image. The loss of Beethoven’s name, biography, company of other German composers, or any reference to music, leaves the viewer to recognize the face without any additional clues. Instead we have an American newspaper, a letter, a math problem, a loop of blue string, and a couple of nails and paper scraps. It is a highly enigmatic composition.

Viewers with different levels of cultural knowledge would then have different encounters with this Peto’s painting. Those who did not recognize Beethoven would see only a photograph. Those who did recognize Beethoven may or may not have realized that this could not be a photograph of Beethoven from life. The most informed viewers could have had known Jäger’s painting from its reproduction in either photographs or prints.

These different levels of cultural knowledge would not necessarily have aligned with social class. Beethoven, like Shakespeare—as we will see in chapter three, bridged elite and

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134 Cartes de visite were a standardized format of photography, typically using albumen prints mounted on thick cardstock. The mounted photographs were 2.5 by 4 inches. They were popularized by French photographer A.A.E. Disdéri and quickly spread across Europe and America. Photo albums were manufactured to fit this format. By the 1870s, their popularity was beginning to wane, and so photographers introduce the cabinet card, simply a larger standardized size of albumen print that was meant to be framed and sit on the cabinet or mantle rather than be tucked away in an album. However, album manufacturers quickly began producing albums to fit the larger scale. Cabinet cards were 4.5 x 6.5 inches. On the carte de visite, see Elizabeth Anne McCauley, A.A.E. Disdéri and the Carte de Visite Portrait Photograph, Yale Publications in the History of Art 31 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); On carte de visite and cabinet card albums and culture in America, see Siegel, Galleries of Friendship and Fame. See also Andrea Volpe, “Cartes de Visite Portrait Photographs and the Culture of Class Formation,” in Looking for America: The Visual Production of Nation and People, ed. Ardis Cameron (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), pp. 42-57.
popular culture in late nineteenth-century America. By painting a cabinet card photograph of a painting of Beethoven, Peto makes the popular accessibility of the composer—and, by extension, participation in popular culture—the subject of his painting. He made a painting that would be accessible to all classes, not exclusive of either end of the social spectrum.

By painting photographs of other paintings, Peto recognized the specific function of image reproduction in his society. Although photographs of paintings lost their original auratic qualities, they gained significant potential for personalization through re-contextualization. This was the way many people had access to fine art images. By evoking this mode of access, Peto welcomed painting-viewers who were more familiar with art reproductions than with original works of art. At the same time, he invited them to pay attention to the differences in their viewing experiences between looking at photos of art versus the real thing.

**Peto, Ordinary Objects in the Artist’s Creative Mind**

John Peto’s *Ordinary Objects in the Artist’s Creative Mind*, 1887, depicts, like so many of Peto’s paintings, an age-damaged wooden door painted dark green, with an array of objects either pasted to the door or hanging from nails (figure 2.32). We will focus on objects mostly on the right side of the painting, arranged in a column including a photograph, a ragged print

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135 On Beethoven’s reception in America during the late nineteenth century, see Michael Broyles, *Beethoven in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 13–67. We find proof that Beethoven was embraced by the cultural elite in many notices of concerts performed at the fine arts academies. See, for example, “Among the Pictures,” *The North American*, November 11, 1880, 1, Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers. Probably the best proof of Beethoven’s ubiquity is a deliciously wry article published in the humorous magazine *Puck* about people who claim that Beethoven is their favorite composer, a position that the author found appallingly clichéd. See W. J. Henderson, “The Unintellectual Life: After Philip Gilbert Hamerton LETTER IV To a Philistine Who Praised Beethoven,” *Puck* (1877-1918): *New York*, November 18, 1885, 187, American Periodicals. Beethoven’s reception in late nineteenth-century seems to confirm to Lawrence W. Levine theory of the formation of cultural hierarchies along the lines of social class in America. See Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).

136 Maxim Karolik, the painting’s owner in the early 1950s, invented this title. Letter from Alfred Frankenstein to Maxim Karolik, February 10, 1953. Preserved in the object file for the painting at the Shelburne Museum, VT.
beneath the photo, and a small painting on un-stretched canvas beneath the print. On the left side, we see a painter’s palette, partially obscured by a cornet and sheet music.

The photograph portrays the bust of a woman with her head turned to the right, showing her profile (figure 2.33). Strong dramatic lighting models her face and highlights her décolletage. She is wearing what appears to be classically inspired attire—a headscarf with thick folds and a flowing dress. This could well be another cigarette photograph, an artist’s model, or a specific individual. Though the exact model for this photograph remains elusive, the sitter bears some resemblance to the opera singer Adelina Patti (1843-1919), one of the most famous sopranos of the era (figure 2.34). Note the dark hair, eyebrows and eyes, her small lips and the softness of her chin. If this photograph were of the opera singer in costume, it would match the theme of visual and musical creativity—complementing the cornet and sheet music.

The photographic form, as noted with earlier examples, makes the image accessible to a wide public. It is not a costly object, and it is not rare. Many people could own copies of a photograph, personalize its meaning through re-contextualization, and overlay it with private associations.

Peto represents the photographic image as crisp and cool, blending a little of the dark green from the wood background into the shadows of the photograph. The photograph appears to be tacked to the door with two small nails, one at the top and bottom of the photo along the central axis. The card curls slightly towards the nailed center.

Despite the nails and lack of perfect flatness, the wholeness and solidity of the photograph contrasts starkly with the print beneath it. We see the ragged remnants of a wood engraving called “The Bathers” designed by Winslow Homer for Harper’s Weekly in 1873.
The page, cut from its magazine context, appears to have been glued directly to the door. A large, irregular portion of the print is missing on the right side, as if someone attempted to scrape the print off the door. Other objects on the door overlap the print, further cropping the image, including the photograph above it, and the palette on the upper left corner. The small canvas painting covers the lower edge. Peto placed a ripped gold envelope in between the canvas and the print, which further obscures the bottom right portion of the print. Despite all of this interference, the two girls in bathing costumes—the main figures of the print—are still largely visible. The only objects that really obscure the girls are the fragments of several small printed cards. Once these cards surely covered the print—though all that remains now are the dangling corners, nailed to the door.

The degradation of Homer’s image comes to the fore. We gain a strong sense from this painting of the inferior paper quality by comparing it to the photograph. Even more than the photograph, we get the message that the print is not itself a precious object. It is also old, fourteen years old. Time is registered not only by its ragged quality but also by the traces of objects that came after it, covering it, that have since also largely fallen away. “The Bathers” began as a design for a print in a weekly magazine, which means that the publishers imagined people might want to look at this print and the others in the issue, for about a week. Then another issue would come out and replace it. It is disposable culture—here preserved, sort of, far beyond its intended lifespan.

As we have seen on several occasions already in this chapter, the mode of viewer interaction with an image plays an important role in determining its social value. Is it to be

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studied individually or put on display to serve in part as decoration? This wood engraving was originally part of a magazine, surrounded by pages of text, some of which addressed this image directly. The act of cutting out one of the prints, which the magazine producers clearly anticipated in using the half-broadsheet format, removed it from its literary context and the fast cycle of periodical publishing. The saver designates it as special, as personally meaningful in some way, and then transfers it into a new context, which might be scholarly, or it might be decorative. In the setting implied by Peto’s painting, the print appears to be decorative and to be failing at its task. It seems as if the door owner exhausted their interest in the print and so attempted to remove it and cover it with a more pertinent object, which also proved not to merit long-term viewing.

By comparing Peto’s painting to the original print, we can see several differences, beyond the torn away right side (figure 2.36). Peto is far less meticulous in style than Haberle, so we do not see the engraved lines that give the print so much visual interest. Peto does not seem to have traced or transferred the image onto the canvas—overlaying the images shows distinct differences in posture and proportions. Much like Haberle, Peto represented this print using only the brush and the naked eye.

In Peto’s painting, the gold envelope covers over the bottom right corner. This is where, on the print, we see the master engraver’s name: Redding, Sc. This is a large work, so it would have been completed in parts by a number of engravers—i.e. jobbed out—and then put together by the master.

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138 “Sea-Bathers.” Harper’s Weekly (August 2, 1873), 671. This is humorous and brief essay about how awkward looking people typically are when they emerge from the ocean in their bathing costumes, and how charming Homer’s picture of sea bathing is by contrast.

139 Here I am paraphrasing Haberle’s assertions about his own work, see p. 100.
In addition to covering over Redding’s name, Peto also erased the signs of jobbed work. Looking closely at the print, it is clear that this print was made of sixteen smaller blocks—the line work does not always align perfectly between blocks, giving a slightly disjointed effect along the grid where the blocks met (figure 2.37). Peto’s painted version gives an effect of unified labor, which harkens back to Homer’s unified design for the print—the work of just one artist. Looking at Peto’s painted version, we again see just one artist’s hand, but in this case, the artist is Peto.

While speaking to an audience that would appreciate the nuanced messages built into the media he represented, Peto insists on the superiority of painting through his translation. Painting these cheap and ephemeral images forced the viewers to contrast the value of the painting with the value of the subject matter. Winslow Homer’s fame by 1887 exacerbates this when we think of the relative value of his paintings compared to his prints. Painting was not only relatively expensive, but it also far outstripped new visual media for physical durability and cultural status.

Below the print is a small canvas painting of a tabletop still life (figure 2.38). Both Peto and Haberle occasionally included paintings within their trompe l’oeil compositions. I explore their treatment of this meta subject matter in greater depth in the following chapter. The subject matter of this painting within the painting is a ceramic mug, a pipe, and stack of books. Peto painted many variants on this composition. It might reference another painting in his oeuvre, or it might be a painting that only exists in this version—without an external referent. Indeed, how can we say that this is not a real painting?

The surface of the small canvas is startlingly textured. The impasto on the mug stands out from the canvas, giving the impression of rough ceramic glaze and, simultaneously, of impasto. Here is one area of the canvas that must be considered materially honest—it is paint representing
paint. Peto knowingly did the opposite of a typical trompe l’oeil painter in this passage. He presented his subject matter—painting—*in addition to* representing it. This transparency creates a concentrated immediacy, distinguishing the painting within the painting from the other interpolated images through its lack of media translation.

The impasto of the painting within the painting connects it to another part of the larger composition—the palette (figure 2.39). Thick, clumped blobs of paint stand out from the canvas along the left edge of the palette. To current day viewers, this is an appealing area of abstraction, colors juxtaposed and muddled, not representing anything but paint itself. There is the wonderful play with the representation of the horn’s mouthpiece—painted to illusionistically rise from the surface, but the physical height of the impasto gives the lie to this effect.

This is a passage of particularly sophisticated reflexivity that encourages viewers to ponder the nature of representation. Trompe l’oeil painters communicated with a broader socio-economic audience not by creating simple or easy work but by building upon widely available visual competencies rather than elite or erudite ones. Viewers did not need a classical education to appreciate the paintings, unlike much of academic painting at the time. However, the paintings do reward critical and prolonged looking as well as fluency in popular visual culture.

The colors of the blobs of paint on the palette are precisely those needed to create the painting as a whole. These hues also represent the smaller painting. So the palette acts an organizing guide or cipher for the whole painting. In this way, Peto asserts his artistic authority over each element. He controls the means of representation of the other media. We see them through his artistic vision and process.

Despite the use of a photograph and print in this painting, the whole composition serves to remind its viewers that Peto is a painter, and it asserts that painting is the paragon of visual
media. The image’s content serves as an allegory for the painter’s process. Each element on the door needed to be added by the implied door owner. We imagine a slow buildup of the door’s surface over time: one day pasting the Homer print to the door, months later scraping it away and nailing cards over it, hanging up the palette, then the cornet and the sheet music, etc. To build up a painting, the artist paints, adjusts, scrapes or scumbles, and paints again, layer upon layer. The finished painting, like the finished composition, is the result of a slow accretion of the surface. The slowness of this process heightens Peto’s control. This slowness contrasts the increasingly rapid production times for photography and prints. Peto’s paintings, like so many of the other trompe l’oeil paintings of this era, insist on the difference and value of painting.

With their mimetic style and use of popular visual culture as subject matter, trompe l’oeil painters welcomed a broad audience to the traditionally elite activity of appreciating oil paintings. The paintings rely on viewers to have sophisticated understanding of the visual culture they represent: to know the associations with different forms of photography; to be familiar with the social practices of exchanging, collecting, arranging cartes de visite or cabinet cards; to have looked closely at illustrated periodicals; to know when a stamp with a certain color and certain face was printed and how much it is worth; to know what people kept in albums and what they put in frames; to know how to detect counterfeit currency; etc. Paintings such as the ones discussed in this chapter offer a vision of the fine arts as masterfully engaged with the changing visual ecology.

These paintings use hypermediation to both emulate and critique contemporary visual culture. They acknowledge the fluidity of image exchange, draw on the attractiveness and

\[140\] The techniques of scraping, sanding, and cutting paint layers away during the process of painting became a much more prevalent technique in the second half of the nineteenth century. Painters were increasingly interested in experimenting with the textural as well as the aesthetic effects of their work. See Lance Mayer and Gay Myers, *American Painters on Technique: 1860-1943* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2013), 43–44.
specialized functions of different forms of images, and assert the preeminence of painting. By highlighting prints and photographs as physically ephemeral and culturally disposable, these artists positioned painting as more lastingly valuable on both fronts. Through their use of mimesis, trompe l’oeil painters expressed their own subjective truths about the nature of contemporary visual culture. To adapt a phrase from Baudelaire, trompe l’oeil paintings are, in their own way, paintings of *modern visual life*.¹⁴¹

Chapter 3: Illusions of Ephemerality

Which is Which?

Jefferson David Chalfant’s Which Is Which? c. 1890 has visibly and physically changed since its debut in informative ways (figure 3.1). The premise of the painting is simple: Chalfant pasted a real postage stamp onto a panel and painted a precise copy right next to it—flaunting his trompe l’oeil abilities. The small panel support, just 3 5/8 by 5 3/8 inches, provides a cozy white border around the centered stamps. One further element completes the composition, an illusionistically painted newspaper clipping that seems to review the very painting we see with the words “[...]gene. Mr. Chalfant pasted a real stamp beside his painting and asks, ‘Which is Which?’”

When we look at this painting today, the two stamps are easy to tell apart—the one on the left appears much more abraded that the one on the right. This was not the case when Chalfant completed the image. Viewers would have needed to look extremely closely, perhaps with the aid of a magnifying glass, to see the subtle differences between the two—comparing the quality of line created by burin and by brush. Historic viewers also relied on touch to inform or confirm their sight. This practice has exacerbated the differences between the two stamps over time. The addition of protective glazing denies today’s viewers this tactile form of knowledge, but this hardly matters as the two stamps are now much more easily distinguishable by sight alone. To

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solve the puzzle today, we need ask ourselves a different question when approaching the painting: which ages better—printed paper or oil on panel paintings? The more durable material—oil paint—makes its presence known through the relatively pristine quality of the stamp on the right.

While Chalfant unwittingly created a painting that now—approximately 130 years later—speaks primarily about deterioration, other trompe l’oeil painters directly explored the poignant themes of the durability and ephemerality of visual media through their representation of painted, printed, and photographic materials in various states of preservation. In chapter two, we explored how trompe l’oeil paintings that represented prints and photographs forced comparisons among visual media and negotiated their overlapping cultural territory by drawing attention to modes of viewer interaction. These paintings sought to take advantage of the visual appeal of other media while ultimately arguing for the superiority of painting. This chapter further investigates how trompe l’oeil paintings shrewdly manipulated viewer expectations for photographic and printed images’ ephemerality in order to distinguish cultural roles for visual media. These painted depictions repeatedly fixated on deteriorating printed and photographic images, compelling us to consider what and how these sometimes-illegible scraps mean.

The trompe l’oeil paintings reproduced in previous chapters have already provided many examples of depictions of deteriorating paper. From the faded and ragged paper currency in Haberle’s *Imitation* to the tidy rips in Harnett’s sheet music in *The Old Violin* to the dangling corners of cards in Peto’s *Ordinary Objects in the Artist’s Creative Mind*, the relative fragility of paper comes to the fore in many trompe l’oeil paintings (figures 3.2-3.4). In order to meaningfully track the presence of deterioration in trompe l’oeil paintings, I set its definitional parameters as a significant change in shape and depicted surface texture, or illegibility due to
worn away ink or tears in the paper. Of particular concern are the effects of deterioration on paper ephemera, which Maurice Rickards, writing an ephemera collector’s guide in 1977, helpfully defined as “the transient everyday items of paper—mostly printed—that are manufactured specifically to use and throw away. […] They are] vital when they are needed, wastepaper immediately afterwards. They flourish for a moment and are done.”

In this chapter, I investigate the relationship between material and functional longevity of ephemera in relation to the longevity of painting.

Other scholars have noticed and attempted to interpret the motif of ephemera deterioration in trompe l’oeil painting. Most often, researchers have read paper deterioration as a manifestation of John F. Peto’s personal distress, even though evidence of ephemerality is also present in Haberle’s and Harnett’s paintings. This interpretation is also problematic because it overlooks vital social, historical, and aesthetic connections. To gain a clearer understanding of the depictions of paper deterioration, I approach them through multiple analytic lenses: the changing technology of paper and pigment production, the aesthetics of age, the tradition of vanitas imagery, and fascination with impending ruin. These interpretations reveal that the unlikely motif of paper deterioration held poignant meaning for historical audiences by piquing concerns about the uncertainty of cultural legacy and the instability of social class distinctions. Further, as I will argue in this chapter, they expose the critical self-reflexivity of trompe l’oeil paintings and a full arsenal of techniques to attract and sustain viewer engagement, which ensures their own cognitive durability. By cognitive durability, I mean the quality of works of art

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that ‘hold up,’ so to speak—that are so rich that they reward multiple viewings. It is the property of works of art that remain interesting, impressive, or inspiring over decades or centuries.

**Scraps and Sadness**

From the earliest scholarly investigations of American trompe l’oeil painting, paper scraps have been firmly associated with one painter in particular, John F. Peto. When Alfred Frankenstein, the patriarch of American trompe l’oeil scholarship in the twentieth century, dramatically presented his discovery that Peto was actually the artist who made many of the trompe l’oeil pictures in museum collections bearing Harnett’s name, he proceeded to lay out a set of distinguishing characteristics for each artist. Among the differences, Frankenstein noted Peto’s proclivity to paint deteriorating objects to a much greater degree than Harnett, especially in the mature periods of both of their careers. Peto painted “loops of string, dog-eared books and tatters of paper” long after Harnett abandoned such “simple, humble objects of his early still lifes to devote his attention to sumptuous ‘antiques.’” In a later publication, Frankenstein made a few tentative remarks about the implication of this difference in subject matter. “It does not take a Freudian psychologist to perceive that Peto’s concern with used-up, discarded, and rejected

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things parallels his own life.” In his writing from the 1950s and 60s, Frankenstein made clear that he was highly skeptical of psychoanalytic interpretation. He stated unequivocally that he thought most of the artist’s choices of subject matter stemmed from aesthetic motivations. However, he could not seem to resist making passing remarks about the underlying meaning, though he did not take the matter further in these early texts. In 1980, Frankenstein wrote an article on Peto’s *Lamps of Other Days*, and his analysis differed markedly from his writing of earlier decades. Here, he interpreted the emotive qualities of deterioration in terms of personal sadness and national discontent. He claimed for Peto the invention of the ‘tragic still life.’

Frankenstein’s methodological change of heart may have been connected to the work of John Wilmerding, the scholar and curator who began publishing on Peto in 1982. Wilmerding added significantly to our knowledge of Peto’s biography through his essays and monographic exhibition and catalogue—the closest things we have to a catalogue raisonné for Peto. The biographical and monographic format perfectly aligns with, and perhaps shaped, Wilmerding’s understanding of Peto’s work. According to Wilmerding, the deterioration we see in Peto’s paintings are emotionally laden responses to his lack of success as an artist, the loss of his father, the pressures of family life, and his poor health towards the end of his life. In an article previewing the exhibition, Wilmerding stated, “Perhaps such increasingly common signs of stress are an unwitting confession of Peto’s struggle to live and create despite his pain.”

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poignancy of this biographical/psychological reading convinced critical viewers such as Gabriel Weisberg, who reviewed the exhibition for ARTnews.10 Through such reviews and through Wilmerding’s later reprisals of these themes, Peto’s melancholy and its visible presence in his paintings became incontrovertible doctrine in the literature.

There are certainly more scraps in Peto’s paintings than other artists’ work, and there are indeed biographical reasons to believe that Peto experienced a great deal of distress. However, the relationship between work and biography cannot be satisfactorily classified as causal without more direct confirmation by the artist or others who knew him closely, evidence that does not now exist in the known Peto archive. Further, we must heed Linda Nochlin’s reminder of the common fallacy of believing that art is a direct, unmediated translation of an artist’s life:

The problem lies not so much with some feminists' concept of what femininity is, but rather with their misconception—shared with the public at large—of what art is: with the naive idea that art is direct, personal expression of individual emotional experience, a translation of personal life into visual terms. Art is almost never that, great art never is. The making of art involves a self-consistent language of form, more or less dependent upon, or free from, given temporally defined conventions, schemata, or systems of notation, which have to be learned or worked out, either through teaching, apprenticeship, or a long period of individual experimentation. The language of art is, more materially, embodied in paint and line on canvas or paper, in stone or clay or plastic or metal—it is neither a sob story nor a confidential whisper.11

While we may want to debate with Nochlin about the extent to which certain artists allow their personal lives and feelings to influence their art, we must accept that creative expression is always mediated—by training, by layers of historical context, as well as by the physical medium. It is these mediating factors which Frankenstein and Wilmerding moved past too quickly, and to which this chapter gives more sustained attention. These factors support my argument that the

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depictions of scraps of paper and other deteriorating objects communicated much to viewers beyond personal psychology.

The first clue that this device of deterioration is not strictly biographical is its presence in the art of other painters to whom no aura of sadness has been historically ascribed. Harnett and Haberle both included worn and damaged paper objects in many of their paintings. Harnett even described his preference for working with old, worn models in an interview.

As a rule, new things do not paint well. New silon [sic] does not look well in a picture. I want my models to have the mellowing effect of age. For instance, some old and most new ivory paints like bone. From other pieces I can get the rich effect that age and usage gives to it—a soft tint that harmonizes well with the tone of the painting. New models selected without judgment as to their painting qualities, would be utterly devoid of picturesqueness, and would mar the effect of the painting beyond all hope of reparation.12

The motivation he cited for his choice of old subjects is aesthetic: picturesqueness and a certain soft tonal quality. Here he spoke of ivory, but his oeuvre also includes old paper scraps. In many of his paintings, we encounter a few sheets of music, an opened envelope, or a folded newspaper—examples of damaged paper that do not quite meet the criteria of scraps or seriously degraded paper. However, there are at least six known paintings that do include the motif of severely worn paper or scraps—which, again, I define as paper that has deteriorated to the extent of displaying significant changes in shape and surface texture, and/or illegibility due to worn away ink or tears in the paper.13 Harnett created two paintings of paper currency and two letter

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12"Painted Like Real Things," article clipping from an unknown source preserved in William Aloysius Blemly, “Blemly Scrapbook,” Scrapbook, 1895, Rare Books in The Metropolitan Museum of Art Libraries, New York, 73. Hereafter, I will refer to the scrapbook at “Blemly Scrapbook.” The word ‘silon’ seems to be a misprint in the original publication. See Frankenstein, After the Hunt, 55, note 24 for his speculations on the intended word.

13 We cannot know if this is an exhaustive count because we do not have a catalogue raisonné for Harnett, or any of the trompe l’oeil artists. This count is based on the Met’s 1992 Harnett exhibition catalogue. See Doreen Bolger, Marc Simpson, and John Wilmerding, eds., William M. Harnett (Fort Worth: New York: Amon Carter Museum; Metropolitan Museum of Art: H.N. Abrams, 1992).
rack paintings, all of which include the motif (figures 3.5-3.8).\textsuperscript{14} Two other paintings, Job Lot Cheap and Attention, Company! also include tattered paper objects (figures 3.9-3.10).

How scholars have treated the worn appearance of Harnett’s subject matter exemplifies the importance of reevaluating the motif in trompe l’oeil painting more broadly. As mentioned in chapter one, David Lubin interpreted the signs of use in Harnett’s subject matter as signaling its distance from the impersonal newness of consumer goods.\textsuperscript{15} Michael Leja argued that the signs of wear added to the tactile appeal of the subject matter.\textsuperscript{16} Both of these interpretations demonstrate the importance of looking beyond the biographical for an explanation of subject matter choice and significance.

Haberle too included paper deterioration in his work, most frequently in his depictions of paper currency, subject matter for which he became notorious (figures 3.11-3.12).\textsuperscript{17} In A Bachelor’s Drawer, we also encounter torn newspaper clippings, a tattered chromolithograph, a ripped and discolored envelope, and numerous fragments of ticket stubs (figure 1.1). Some of the other currency-dominated paintings also include newspaper clippings in bad shape, often playing crucial compositional roles as their partial scripts typically reference Haberle or his work (figure

\textsuperscript{14} The paper deterioration motif seems to be integral to the subgenres of currency paintings and to rack paintings or office board paintings. Peto created more paintings of these types than did Harnett or Haberle, so, in this way, it makes sense that Peto more frequently depicted paper scraps.


\textsuperscript{16} Leja, Looking Askance: Skepticism and American Art from Eakins to Duchamp (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 125-52, see especially 140-43.

\textsuperscript{17} My count of Haberle’s currency paintings, including A Bachelor’s Drawer and Imitation, is eight paintings. This count is based on Gertrude Grace Sill’s catalogues. There are likely more unaccounted paintings in private collections. See Sill, John Haberle, Master of Illusion (Springfield, Mass.: Museum of Fine Arts, 1985); Sill, John Haberle: American Master of Illusion (New Britain, CT: Hanover: New Britain Museum of American Art; Distributed by University Press of New England, 2009).
Beyond currency painting, another of Haberle’s favored subgenres was the ‘torn-in-transit’ style composition, featuring damaged postal packages. In these paintings, ripped brown shipping paper reveals a conventional landscape or cityscape painting underneath (figures 3.14-3.16). While the paper in these images does not appear to be deteriorating due to age, it is clearly fragile and vulnerable.

Scholars have not interpreted the meaning of torn scraps of paper in Haberle and Harnett’s paintings to nearly the same extent as Peto, and they certainly have not equated the motif’s presence in their paintings with personal histories of distress. These paintings suggest questions that the previous scholarship has not adequately addressed. What were the historical cultural attitudes towards the materiality of paper? How did the aesthetics of age impact the artists’ choices? What societal resonance did the broader concepts of ephemerality and permanence provoke for historical viewers?

As Wilmerding continued to write about Peto, he shifted his argument about personal sadness to also then reflect a national melancholy. In Wilmerding’s 1999 publication, *The Compass and Clock*, he used Peto’s work along with several others from the same era to demonstrate pervasive themes of loss, melancholy, and nostalgia. Peto and the other ‘melancholic’ artists were more than depressed individuals, according to Wilmerding, they reflected the turmoil of the era in the wake of the Civil War, coupled with the pressures of modernization.19

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18 For a focused investigation of Haberle’s use of self-referential newspaper clippings in his paintings, see Jennifer A. Greenhill, *Playing It Straight: Art and Humor in the Gilded Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 139-163; See also Robert F. Chirico, who briefly addresses Haberle’s use of news clippings as a way to evoke narrative in his paintings, “Language and Imagery in Late Nineteenth-Century Trompe l’Oeil,” *Arts Magazine* 59, no. 7 (1985): 111.

While Wilmerding’s argument is not quite as sweeping as Mumford’s summation of the latter part of the nineteenth century in *The Brown Decades*, there still lingers the threat of reducing a complex range of individual and emotive experiences to one dark wash of melancholy. There were undoubtedly extraordinary stressors during this era, which certainly must have affected the creative output. However, by making such large metaphorical leaps from deteriorated forms to national sadness, we may be overlooking valuable layers of significance.

By investigating what else deterioration might mean, and how the physical qualities of the deteriorating subject matter can connote meaning, this study does actually confirm part of Wilmerding’s interpretation of the motif of deterioration. Not only Peto, but also Harnett and Haberle were all responding to modernization. Their paintings dynamically engage with changing visual technology and material culture, taking advantage of both the surrounding excitement and anxiety to position their medium—oil painting—as enduringly valuable.

**A New Formula for Cheap Paper**

Why buy a painting when you can get prints or photographs for a fraction of the cost? Trompe l’oeil paintings seem to anticipate this question by asking their viewers to consider the limitations of other visual media. They confidently invite comparison through their subject matter and medium. How long will paper-based images really last, and does their ephemeral

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20 Lewis Mumford, *The Brown Decades; a Study of the Arts in America, 1865-1895* (New York: Dover Publications, 1955). Although Mumford’s professed point is that the late nineteenth century was not all sad and drab, he wrote as an apologist for the arts, describing the national reasons for distress and the muddy palettes of many painters prior to picking out a few bright spots—painters who he thought did extraordinary work despite the bleak circumstances.

content even merit saving, they seem to ask. Paintings offer viewers stability in an increasingly fast-paced world, and distinction in an increasingly democratic one. Through their frequent depictions of deteriorating paper scraps, trompe l’oeil paintings pique societal hopes and concerns related to the durability of visual media.

As discussed in chapter one, the material properties of an artistic medium, including its resilience and stability, always impact the meaning of the content it supports. Because the subject matter in trompe l’oeil painting is often other media, these paintings invite us to pay extra attention to the messages and associations embedded in specific media. To begin unpacking the implications of media durability, we will investigate the basic premise that people viewed painting as more durable than paper. This question became more complicated in the specific historical context of the decades in which trompe l’oeil artists worked because of the changes in manufacturing of paper, books, and oil paint.

William Harnett’s meticulously painted depiction of aging books and scraps of paper in *Job Lot Cheap* from 1878 offers useful testing ground to explore these concepts and to see how they shape potential interpretations (figure 3.9). I am intentionally starting with an artist other than Peto to counteract the historiographical tendency to assign the device of paper deterioration to Peto exclusively.

Looking at Harnett’s painting, we see a pile of old books heaped upon a wooden platform or box that itself is plastered with shredded publishers’ labels. A plank of the wooden surface runs parallel to the picture plane in the bottom quarter of the painting. Harnett combines two composition types here—the tabletop still life that recedes into space in the upper three quarters of the painting, and the trompe l’oeil plank that appears to be level with the surface of the painting and from which the labels appear to protrude outward into the viewer’s space. The shift
from receding to projecting perspective signals a distinction between the subject matter in each part of the painting: printed labels or broadsides below and bound books above.

When we look closer at the bottom portion of the painting, we can appreciate the almost scumbled effect of colorful paper labels pasted onto the board and ripped away again, with overlapping shreds suggesting the passage of time (figure 3.17). The green label on the left that once bore the heading “Just Published” is now interrupted, but not rendered fully illegible, by tears and wrinkles. The words on the pink, yellow, and blue labels are less discernable, not just because of layering but also because the bottom edge of the painting bisects them. We also see two nails on the right side of the painting—holding up the remaining white corners of a card. The dog-eared pink label and the scraped away right edge of the yellow paper confront the viewer with further examples of the fragility of paper.

These scraps appear to be physically insubstantial, which implies that their content does not merit preservation. Like printed periodicals and tickets for admission to an event, advertisements such as these labels have a limited functional life, lasting only long enough to communicate that goods are for sale to potential buyers. If the goods are sold or change, a new label is needed and the old become worthless. They are ephemeral in both form and function.

Paper in the much more durable and historically respected form of books dominates the upper portion of the composition. Without looking at these specific books, we have a set of ideas of what the format of a book implies. Books, with covers and bindings to protect the pages, are meant to last, to convey knowledge of lasting cultural worth. Books are to be collected in one’s library, to be lent to friends and left to one’s heirs, and, in turn, reflect the education, taste, and values of their owners. Such objects of erudition and wealth would be respectable and acceptable subjects for paintings.
Before even raising our gaze to inspect the specific volumes in this painting, we encounter two visual clues that the tomes in this painting are something other than signifiers of a luxurious education. On the far left, we see that the handwritten sign that give the title to the work, “Job Lot Cheap,” is made out of the cover of a book (figure 3.18). This cover shows significant signs of wear and age: the brown cloth covering is fraying along the right edge, the bare paperboard corner is soft and rounded from use, and there is foxing on the paper lining. The physical decay of the book cover shows the limits of the longevity of books, and its repurposing as a sign suggests that its form as a book did not guarantee its ongoing value as such.

Our second clue is in the center of the painting. Here, we see a single white page, obviously torn from a book, tucked under the pile of books and hanging over the edge of the table (figure 3.19). This single page creates a visual transition between the shifts in perspectival space to unite the composition. It also materially connects the thin paper labels to the books above. Its tattered edges further undermine the elevated status of the books—we wonder, from which now-less-than-whole book was this page ripped?

The artfully haphazard mound of books on top of the platform consists of bound volumes of many shapes, sizes, and colors—with covers of various materials and states of decay (figure 3.20). Leather and clothbound books show abrasion around the edges and spines. The blue paperback book at the back of the pile seems to be in the worst shape. Its torn cover is wrinkled and discolored, and the binding is showing through at the spine. Rather than neat, orderly stacks of books that might suggest an intentional and cherished collection, the volumes rest at odd angles, propped up by each other in a precarious balance, some seemingly tossed into place as the pages splay open. The color play and contrast of bright pages with dark bindings invite the eye to bounce around the composition, linking green binding with green label and so on,
bringing levity to this motley mess. The arrangement of the books and the color distribution only reinforces the feeling that the arranger of these books did not seek to convey reverence for valuable objects of culture.

During the nineteenth century, papermaking and bookmaking technology vastly changed the accessibility of books to people across the economic spectrum, which undermined their status as exclusively objects of privilege. According to David Jaffee, in the early republic, books certainly were objects of cultural clout, mostly imported from London, expensive, and typically written in inaccessibly lofty tones.²² Richard Bushman’s research shows that over the course of the nineteenth century, middle- and lower-class Americans began emulating the taste and culture of the gentry through material and behavioral acquisitions. The process of refinement was aided by the greater affordability of books, which both contained valuable advice and knowledge, and symbolically represented social advancement.²³ By the late nineteenth century, middle-class people accepted that having an appropriate library was an important part of self-fashioning; books would both develop intelligence and identify the owners as intellectual.²⁴

Several technological changes in the production of both paper and books made these objects much more affordable. Andrew Walker notes the importance of new mechanical modes


of book binding that significantly brought down the costs of production. As we recall from chapter two, the steam-powered printing press made producing the pages of the books to be bound also much more cost, time, and labor efficient. The shift in raw material for papermaking from rag to wood pulp also drastically impacted the affordability and rate of production of books. At the same time, as Robert Chirico reminds us, education reforms extended literacy to an ever-widening population.

These decreases in price and increases in accessibility went hand-in-hand with reactions from the established elite to reinforce hierarchical differences in status. Since new books tended to be cheaper, William Gerdts suggested that Harnett created this painting of old books specifically to appeal to rare book collectors. Walker, who connected the new production method of bookbinding to the rise in interest amongst rare book collectors for hand-made bindings, agrees that these older books may have appealed to specialized collectors, but he makes a more nuanced argument by recognizing that such collectors were also often businessmen who benefited from the changes in production techniques. Neither Gerdts nor Walker takes sufficient account of the poor condition of the books on display in Job Lot Cheap.

It is the poor condition of the books that reminds us that the value and meaning of books is made up of more than cost and social class accessibility. Books are physically embodied


symbols, and their tangible qualities affect how we perceive their symbolic and literal content. We cannot help but judge them by their covers to some extent.

As the most seismic material change in the production of books and other paper-based products in the nineteenth century, the shift to wood pulp-based paper is worth considering in greater depth. Expensive rag-based papers (composed mainly of cotton, flax, and hemp) found competition in the 1860s from the processing of esparto—a kind of grass. The 1870s saw the development of wood pulp derived paper, and in the 1880s, wood cellulose became the main component of paper manufacturing.30 As early as 1881, cultural observers noted the vast impact of the switch to wood pulp. A reporter for Scientific American stated it bluntly, “The invention of wood pulp has revolutionized paper making and paper prices. It has brought good books, good newspaper, and writing paper within the means of thousands of the common people who could never have afforded such luxuries had rags remained the only available material for papers of good quality.”31

At that point in the century, America boasted of the most paper-mills in the world and journalists took the opportunity to equate paper-production with cultural advancement, claiming a long-desired leg up on Europe. “When we consider the great populations of European countries, and the high degree of civilization that has long prevailed in most of them, it is surprising that this country, settled recently—comparatively speaking—by civilized races, should have so rapidly stolen the march on older nations in the development of the paper


A report on a politically fraught wood-pulp monopoly confirms the link between paper and education in the public’s perception, describing the high cost of wood pulp as “levying a direct tax upon the education and intelligence of the country.” Paper as a material symbolized all of the knowledge that could be written upon it. Wood-pulp paper in particular represented the increased accessibility of that knowledge and the potential for a more highly educated citizenry.

A decade later, publications continued to present the increased production of paper as a cultural win for America. The tone of advancement and optimism colors an 1897 report in *Scientific American*: "If the consumption of white paper is any indication of the true literary tendencies of the age, we have reason to congratulate ourselves upon the growth and spread of general education." The same article marvels at the exponential increases in production in the recent past. "The daily capacity of the book and news mills of the United States shows an increase of 14 per cent over the last year, and shows the phenomenal increase of 352 per cent during the past fifteen years.” This massive increase in paper production rippled outward as wood pulp infiltrated other areas of manufacturing. According to the *Philadelphia Record* in 1897, "Boots, money, boats, gas pipes, impermeable casks, toys, bottles, pipes, floors, doors, ceilings, architectural ornaments, roofing, chimneys, and even complete fire-proof houses are now made of paper.” Other publications specifically note its use for bicycle tires and burial

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caskets for its superior durability. These publications were playing up the shock factor of a traditionally flimsy material associated with ephemera being used in objects that require greater permanence—even to the point of staving off bodily decay after death! The nature of the journalistic exaggeration usually becomes clear later in the articles, as the authors go on to discuss the additional processing, such as pressurization and chemical treatments that imbue these paper-like materials with such properties of resilience even under the stresses of weather, fire, and frequent use. We must therefore consider that for some viewers of trompe l’oeil paintings, seeing depictions of the fragility of paper, may have clashed severely with what they had read in journalistic accounts of this seemingly miraculous new material.

It is not until the very turn of the century that writers began to express concern about the longevity of ordinary paper, two decades after Harnett’s bleak vision of the fate of books and paper. In 1898, Scientific American drew its readers’ attention to the issue, “The subject of the lasting qualities of paper is a most important one, as upon it depends very largely the permanence of our literature. It is a curious fact that nearly every large library which circulates books is obliged from time to time to throw away books which are really worn out.” The author specifically linked the problem of paper decay to the new processes and raw materials used to make paper. This article cited a recent study by the London based Royal Society of Arts, the journal for which gives more details on the inquiry.

The Committee on the Deterioration of Paper reported to the Royal Society their concern that “Time has not yet been able to pronounce a judgment upon the relative permanence of the


papers made from them [new fibrous raw materials]. There is more than a suspicion that many of them are very inferior in this important respect…”38 The committee concluded that though some have overestimated the threat of deterioration, the difference between rag paper and wood-pulp paper in terms of deterioration and discoloration is indeed substantial. Rag paper, if not exposed to acid, can be very stable. Wood-pulp paper, however, naturally oxidizes without exposure to any external chemicals beyond those already present in the air. They recommend, for “normal standard of quality for book papers required for publications of permanent value” that at least 70% of the composition of paper should rag fibers, and for writing paper, it should be 100% rag fiber.39

Both of these accounts present concern specifically for books, which they designated as ‘publications of permanent value,’ essentially distinguishing books from ephemera—or publications with transient value. The quality of paper should match the quality of writing in this respect, they imply. In 1904, Outlook published an article addressing the poor life expectancy of newsprint because, again, of the reliance on wood-pulp. Ironically, the author of this periodical article is unsure whether newsprint should be preserved. "Who of us would willingly have our life of to-day pictured for posterity as it is reflected in the press, with its garishness, vulgarity, triviality, exaggeration, and lack of perspective?"40 The tone and quality of the writing, the author implies, is suitable for a short-lived existence.


This is an essential point: that there was understood to be a fundamental relationship between the durability of the material and the enduring value of the content when it came to paper. Trompe l’oeil artists, I argue, attempted to extend that logic to the visual media. Further, they did so a quarter of a century before this point was made in print.

**Paper’s Ephemerality**

By 1904, trompe l’oeil painters had been pointing out the instability of paper in their paintings for over twenty years. Journalists, it seems, came late to the conversation. Other visual and material culture practices show that trompe l’oeil painters were responding to concerns shared by many, though not yet discussed in the press. The act of scrapbooking and the invention of the time capsule, both cultural artifacts of the mid to late nineteenth century, indicate a level of cultural anxiety around the longevity of paper.

Writing a guide to scrapbook making in 1880, E.W. Gurley commented on the impetus behind the scrapbooker’s intervention, stating “In Franklin’s day there were two newspapers in America; now there are about 8000 periodicals of all grades, constantly flooding the land with a stream of intelligence. Much of this is ephemeral, born for the day and dying with the day; yet scarcely a paper falls into the hands of the intelligent reader in which he does not see something worth keeping.”

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“to make obscure sources of information available to practical application.”42 While only some of his collection was arranged in scrapbooks, Rice’s project shares Gurley’s concern for preserving “the facts which are daily slipping away from us.”43

The rapid news cycle matched the rising pace of life, of transportation, communication, and manufacturing, as discussed in chapter one. We see in the efforts of scrap keepers and scrapbookers a desire for stability, and personalization, as we will explore further in the next chapter. Through the very stillness of still-life—the sense of time preserved in their enduring compositions—trompe l’oeil painters offered a reprieve from the surrounding swiftness.

Ellen Gruber Garvey, the foremost scholar on American nineteenth-century scrapbooking, explained the attempt to move printed items from ephemeral to permanent forms as a primary motivation in scrapbook making. Not only did transferring clippings and scraps into book form give them greater permanence, it also conferred and communicated the value of permanence through the shift in form.44 At their most basic, scrapbooks may contain a single collection of serially published essays or stories that the scrapbook maker wanted to keep on the shelf with their other books, and thereby give the story the status of a book. A prime example is Stanley Waters’s Mark Twain brand scrapbook, which he filled with his own serially published articles, thereby making himself a book author.45


43 Gurley, Scrap-Books, 10.

44 Garvey, Writing with Scissors: American Scrapbooks from the Civil War to the Harlem Renaissance (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2013). Garvey treats the theme of making the ephemeral permanent throughout the book, see especially the introduction and pages 49-59.

45 Stanley Waters, “Scrapbook” (1881), American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, MA. Waters had a regular column in The Salem Gazette in which he published excerpts from the journals of Dr. Bentley, a minister and diarist working in the 1790s. Given that he was publishing the writings of another man, perhaps Waters’s scrapbook puts him in the position of a book editor rather than author.
By materially intervening on the periodical lifecycle, scrapbook makers asserted their agency against the top-down decisions of what text deserved what form. Scrapbookers disturbed the dichotomy between publications of permanent and transient value, and thus weakened the publishers’ authority over their intellectual lives.\(^{46}\) However, scrapbook makers did not question the intrinsic superiority of the book form. They sought to appropriate the authority of this form for content of their choosing. In this way, scrapbookers essentially reinforced the dichotomy between forms through their scrapbooking practices. At the same time, however, the authority of the book form as an item of exclusive erudite luxury was weakening due to the vast increase in mechanically produced books, now much more affordable and much less rare.

Scrapbookers sought to preserve ephemeral information because it was at risk of being lost due to its format. The perceived threat of losing important text and images seems to derive largely from the influx in periodical production, which meant that there was simply too much to keep. The changing technology of papermaking fueled the increase in production—and thereby the need for selection—by creating this troubling surplus. It also produced the need for special preservation due to the decreasing quality of the paper itself.

Nick Yablon’s research on the development of the time capsule in the late 1870s and early 1880s suggests that people were worried about the physical durability of paper, especially new wood-pulp paper.\(^{47}\) Anna Deihm was one of the first people to create what Yablon recognizes as a time capsule. The meager display of documents and artifacts from early American history made it clear to Deihm how important it was to actively attempt to preserve items of current history. Deihm took it upon herself to ensure the national legacy for posterity.

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\(^{46}\) For more on the agency of scrapbookers, see Garvey, *Writing with Scissors*, 47–49.

She designed what she called a Century Safe, which, along with all of its contents, was on display at the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition in 1876. Deihm selected mostly ephemeral items representing America’s contemporary “statesmen, jurists, legislators, orators, clergymen, poets, scientists, historians, and merchants.” The plan was that the safe would be opened 100 years hence at the world’s fair of 1976, ensuring a better showing of American historical documents. Deihm and other early time capsule makers were concerned about the longevity of paper-based items—autograph books, photo albums, etc. For Deihm, even the transformation of these individual objects by gathering them into the protective folds of a book seemed insufficient to the task of preserving history for the distant future. Deihm procured special high-quality parchment as the basis of her memorializing books, deeming ordinary wood-pulp paper unreliable at best.

In the material culture practices of making scrapbooks and creating time capsules, we see a concern for the durability of paper-based objects considerably before the press voiced such concerns. While this disjunction may be surprising, it indicates the importance of looking not just at textual evidence. It is these material culture practices that best seem to contextualize Harnett’s painting.

*Ars Longa*

In *Job Lot Cheap*, both the composition and the difference of subject matter imply a division between the upper and lower parts of the painting. Traditionally, lateral spatial elevation implies a hierarchy, a superiority of the upper contents over the lower. The difference in status of the forms of subject matter initially seems to confirm this hierarchy, with books above and paper

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49 Yablon, 9.
labels below. However, Harnett tempers the weighted dichotomy through the title, the shabby quality of the books, and the unifying elements of the composition that connect the two zones of the painting—the loose page, the book-cover sign, and the echoes of color choices. His composition provokes certain viewer expectations, which the details of the painting then undermine. People viewing this painting may still conclude that books are longer lived and better bearers of history than single sheets of paper, but this relative durability is far from real permanence. His painting observes and reinforces the cultural shift away from the reification of the book as a form that signifies elite cultural status.

As Harnett’s painting represents books for sale, we might think of it as an advertisement. In this light, the painting would surely do less to convince the viewers to invest in books than in paintings—the medium that by contrast retains the highest status and potential for permanence. The trompe l’oeil effects of the bottom portion of the painting especially, where it is most difficult to distinguish between presentation and representation, invite the viewers to compare paint to paper for their material qualities.

Paintings promise longevity and also uniqueness. Harnett took the image of books that were increasingly available to everyone and created a new picture that only one person could possess. Further, Harnett seems to promise that painting can make the ephemeral permanent in a way that even books ultimately fail to do. Scrapbooks generally were only meant to extend the life of ephemera to the lifespan of the scrapbook maker, whereas paintings should outlive the original owner to be passed down to posterity.

The Latin phrase, *vita breva ars longa* means that life is short, but art is long. For a very long time, people have understood that one of the roles of art—of creative endeavors—is to cheat
death, to leave something behind that will ensure the legacy of its creator. The material permanence of painting is part of what makes it a valuable cultural artifact. Harnett and other trompe l’oeil painters created meta-commentary on the permanence of their art form, painting, by depicting deteriorating subject matter. Such paintings are intrinsically about the enduring value of painting in a world increasingly flooded with ephemeral media.

It is no coincidence that trompe l’oeil paintings address the permanence of painting when, at the same time, America was investing in art museums, organizations specifically tasked with the preservation of art. Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts opened in 1876. The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York opened in 1870, and the Corcoran in Washington DC opened in 1869. These institutions were dedicated not only to the cultural education of the current generation, but also to future Americans and visitors. Museums have always had a conservation mission; as David Lowenthal puts it, “Museums are dedicated to preserving not just individual works of art but ‘the notion that works of art are fixed and immortal.’”

Aesthetics of Age
Nineteenth-century viewers understood paintings to be long-lived but not impervious to the effects of time. However, unlike common ephemera or even books, paintings were said to improve or mellow with age rather than deteriorate—like fine wine. Gaining aesthetic and monetary value over time rather than quickly diminishing was a significant distinguishing factor

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52 David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country - Revisited* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 246. This source provides a broad historical overview of the complex emotional responses to the concepts of age, past, newness, etc.
between fine art and other forms of visual culture and ordinary commodities. Highlighting this
difference was, I argue, one of the ways trompe l’oeil painters attempted to negotiate the position
of painting in the changing image ecology. An overall darkening of tone of paintings over years
and decades was anticipated by many painters and appreciated by painting owners.53 One of
Harnett’s paintings, a tabletop composition called Ease, received a compliment in this vein from
a reporter from the Springfield Daily Profit in 1887. “He [Harnett] has imparted to the canvas a
depth and rich harmony of tone which will improve with time, and even increase the interest of
the painting.”54 This anticipated change in aesthetic would both prove and communicate the
lasting value of the painting.

The appearance of old age in artwork has long been highly valued, so much so that many
artists chose to emulate these effects in new works of art. This practice was often considered
deceptive—a way to foist new work on buyers specifically seeking old art objects. The idea of
the faked ancient artwork held currency in the American imaginary in the late nineteenth
century. In 1869, Mark Twain wrote a fictional short story “The Legend of the Capitoline
Venus” in which a struggling American sculptor living in Rome makes his fortune by partially
destroying, burying, and excavating one of his statues. Mistaken for an ancient sculpture of
Venus, the sculpture gains fame and exponentially increases in value.55 The visible signs of age
could have a dramatic effect on the perceived cultural and thus monetary value of a work of art.

53 Lance Mayer and Gay Myers, American Painters on Technique: 1860-1945 (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2013). See especially their section on William Page, a mid to late nineteenth century American painter who intentionally sought to emulate the look of aged paintings in his new works to disastrous results, 1-13. See also their discussion of the late nineteenth-century debate on tone, 86-93. See also Lowenthal, The Past Is a Foreign Country, 265 on the history and debate around the desirableness of visible patina in aging paintings.


55 Lowenthal, The Past Is a Foreign Country, 258; Mark Twain, Mark Twain’s Sketches New and Old: Now First Published in Complete Form (Hartford, CT; Chicago: American Publishing Co, 1875), 222–28. Twain first published this story in the Buffalo Express in 1869.
The look of old age conveyed powerful messages about cultural authority; those in possession of such old things were typically in positions of power themselves. The aesthetic of age implied wealth, lineage, and influence. Possessing an old painting could suggest coming from a historically privileged family. Michaël Vottero discusses the collection of older paintings by nouveaux riches Gilded Age Americans as a strategic move to emulate gentility in order to also gain the power and authority of such a family line.\textsuperscript{56} Collecting offered an alternative to inheritance in the pursuit of cultural status. It is therefore unsurprising that this aesthetic became popular even when divorced from actual objects of antiquity.

Painters in the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth century sought to compete with the Old Masters through attempts to discover the Venetian Secret or Titian’s Secret—a painting technique they believed held the key to the muted yet vibrant tonality of Renaissance painters.\textsuperscript{57} Although techniques evolved over the course of the century, many painters continued to prize what they thought of as tonal harmony, a darker foil to the often bold and fresh appearance of much of the work coming out of the Impressionist and Post-Impressionist movements.\textsuperscript{58} These late nineteenth-century tonal painters would come to be known as Tonalists, following Wanda Corn’s exhibition and essay in 1972.\textsuperscript{59}


\textsuperscript{58} Mayer and Myers, \textit{American Painters on Technique: 1860-1945}, 86–93.

Nineteenth-century critic and writer John Ruskin describes the effects of age in positive aesthetic terms as lending visual interest in the case of old buildings. “Every excrescence or cleft involves some additional complexity of light and shade, and every stain of moss on eaves or walls adds to the delightfulfulness of color…” Ruskin admired the organic irregularity characterized by broken lines, mottled hues, contrast and compositional elements that do not adhere to a strict regular pattern.60 Alois Riegl’s description of what he termed ‘age value,’ is a useful basis for understanding the specific aesthetics of age. “Age value is revealed in imperfection, a lack of completeness, a tendency to dissolve shape and color, characteristics that are in complete contrast with those of modern, i.e., newly created, works.”61 Though Ruskin and Riegl are here describing works in stone, monuments and buildings, many of these same formal elements apply to paintings as well.

We know that for Harnett, deciding to paint aged objects was motivated by aesthetic preference. In his quote describing his tendency to paint old, worn objects, Harnett uses highly evocative language: “mellowing effect” “rich effect” “soft tint” “picturesqueness.” This language, and the aesthetic it evokes, resonates with the descriptions in Ruskin’s and Riegl’s writings, and a painting tradition that moves from romantic and picturesque to Tonalist over the course of the nineteenth century. The signs of age in the subject matter of trompe l’oeil paintings evoke an established picturesque aesthetic that was simultaneously explored by more critically celebrated artists.


Trompe l’oeil artists intentionally cultivated the aesthetic of age. Harnett, in the same interview quoted above, goes on to describe an instance in which he selected worn aspects of multiple still-life models in order to construct the ideally toned object on the canvas. We also know that Peto sometimes added signs of wear and tear to his models in paintings. In *Bowie Knife, Keyed Bugle and Canteen*, he described a photograph of another painting with rips and folds in the mounting paper, which do not match the mounted photograph discovered amongst his possessions. In chapter two, I argued that these added signs of age accentuated this historical distance between the present and the Civil War subject matter of the photographic reproduction. Further, it highlights the different standards of care between photographs, which can be relatively easily replaced, and paintings, which are much more unique and therefore precious.

Peto’s choice to age up his subject matter may certainly also have been aesthetically motivated. There is a story about Peto told at his house museum in New Jersey that accentuates Peto’s love for the aesthetics of age. Peto apparently collected old things, objects which might be subject matter in his paintings, but which might also decorate his home. He placed an old, tarnished vase in his sitting room. Someone else in the household clearly did not share his aesthetic vision, because they cleaned the vase, much to Peto’s consternation.62

To highlight the aesthetic contribution of aged subject matter, we turn our attention to Peto’s *Take Your Choice*, a painting that is compositionally quite similar to Harnett’s *Job Lot Cheap* (figure 3.21). In this painting, we see that the application of the aesthetic of age bleeds from the subject matter to the painting as a whole. *Take Your Choice* features a roughly made wooden box, overflowing with books, with a whitewashed wall behind. We see a torn label on the box panel and a few tattered and detached book covers below the books, echoed not only in

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62 Conversation with Peto Foundation member Harry Brown, July 30, 2016.
the ragged books in the box, but also in an area of the wall above the books where we encounter more remnants of labels (figures 3.22-3.23). The chalky whitewash on the back wall is uneven and variegated, creating a marbled effect that is most extreme in the upper left corner, like fog trying to resolve (figure 3.24). The soft and mottled appearance of the wall connects most specifically to the way the brown-covered book in the front left corner of the box is worn away to a lighter tan (figure 3.25). Overall, the painting revels in the softness and pleasing natural variation that come with age. It is a paean to picturesque decay.

These passages of organic mottling, of complexities of light and shade, of stains and soft irregular edges—seem to connect in spirit with Ruskin’s fond picturesque description of old stone buildings. As with Harnett’s painting, the repetition of colors on Peto’s canvas draws the eye around the composition, but so do the passages of deterioration into smoky softness. The organic forms contrast the rectilinear shapes of the books, attracting viewer attention. The green and white patches on the lower right—where a label was pasted and then mostly scraped off—overlap with a dangling cover that shares the hues of green and white eroding into brown. The most worn covers of the books in the box create an inner circuit for the eye, moving from the brown book on the left, to the orange book close to the center, and the blue one above. When viewers follow the mottled pattern to the back wall and to the torn labels, they naturally connect center to periphery, engaging with the whole picture plane.

Ruskin, so keen to exult such aesthetic pleasures when it came to old buildings, was blind to their value in trompe l’oeil painting—a style of painting he dismissed for its deceptive nature. The only pleasure Ruskin found in trompe l’oeil painting was in the discovery of deception, which was a tainted pleasure because it centered on falsehood. He claimed that trompe l’oeil artists, by irresistibly calling viewer attention to the surface of the canvas and tricking them into
close looking to detect the artist’s hand, succeeded only in showing off their manual skills—discouraging viewers from contemplating the subject matter.\footnote{John Ruskin, Modern Painters (London: Smith, Elder & Company, 1843), 20–30. Over this stretch of pages, Ruskin defines and compares "imitation" and "truth" as he understands them in the context of art. His understanding of imitation is what we now call trompe l’oeil. For an interrogation of the internal logic of Ruskin's complaints about imitation, see Caroline Levine, “Seductive Reflexivity: Ruskin’s Dreaded Trompe l’oeil,” The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 56, no. 4 (1998): 367–75, https://doi.org/10.2307/432127.}

Ruskin’s disdain of trompe l’oeil painting underestimates both viewers and painters, both of whom paid significant attention to the presented subject matter. This is not to say that the subject matter was intrinsically valuable. It often was not, and that was half the point. Scraps of paper may in reality be garbage, but in a painting, they could be both laden with meaning and the bearers of visual pleasure.

These effects of deterioration rendered in paint are intrinsically more fascinating that the mottled objects themselves. Still life as the traditionally least valued genre often has had to struggle against the academic notion that the value of a work of art is dependent upon the value of its subject matter. Because of the intense illusion of trompe l’oeil painting, distinguishing painting from subject matter is all the more fraught. However, by depicting cheap and popular subject matter in a state of physical decay, trompe l’oeil artists boldly defy this traditional value system by emphasizing the lowliness of their subject matter in order to highlight the values of their own medium and their skills in working with it. Their work could provide visual pleasure and meaningful contemplation without representing independently esteemed subject matter. Stoichiță reminds us that part of the pleasure in looking at trompe l’oeil painting is the momentary material confusion, and the appreciation of the artist’s skill in representing such a specific sensation.\footnote{Stoichiță, The Self-Aware Image: An Insight into Early Modern Meta-Painting (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 18.} Seeing the objects through the artist’s vision can highlight visual pleasures
in ordinary life. When it comes to depicting decay, it may strike viewers as counterintuitive and therefore especially interesting, to think about a painter using an additive process to emulate the effects created in life by the subtractive process of paper wearing away or color fading.

These passages marked by deterioration encourage viewers to look slowly. The complexity and fuzziness of the transitions between colors and shades take more work to resolve and absorb. Areas of partial and full illegibility slow viewers down and create opportunities for viewers to ponder what they are looking at—what is the subject matter, what does it represent, and how, crucially, is it represented? The passages that require close scrutiny point viewers back to the process of making, traces of the artist’s hand, and the materiality of the medium. Even in trompe l’oeil paintings in which this device occurs less prevalently—an accent rather than an overall theme—it creates a strong pull to the eye. The visual complexity of the mottled hues and the irregular lines can act as an oasis of organic forms in a space typically filled with manufactured objects.

Whether playing a large or small role in a painting, this device connects trompe l’oeil paintings aesthetically to more critically acclaimed contemporary artwork. The soft, foggy mottled appearance in the upper left corner of Take Your Choice proposes a kinship with Whistler’s evanescent nocturnes—where forms seem to hover between legibility and illegibility (figure 3.26). George Inness, who, as we recall from chapter two, would surely have balked at the idea of being aesthetically compared to trompe l’oeil artists, shares this element of mottled color transitions and hazy, organic forms in many of his landscapes. See the ambiguous shifts between cloud, tree, and sky in Inness’s October (figure 3.27), so reminiscent of the effects that Harnett and Peto deploy to represent torn remnants of paper labels. We also see the irregular shapes and organic line quality in Blakelock’s many depictions of trees (figure 3.28). The
silhouetted leafy branches against a twilit sky look utterly natural and yet oddly un-arboreal—as if they grew like moss or lichen over the canvas.

These qualities of Tonalist paintings have been discussed most eloquently by a recent exposition at the Clark Institute called “Like Breath on Glass, Whistler, Inness and the Art of Painting Softly.” The title and underlying theme for the exhibition came from a quote by Whistler: “Paint should not be applied thick. It should be like breath on the surface of a pane of glass.”

Mark Simpson, one of the curators of the show, explains the particular poignancy of this expression. “The phrase is apt from several points of view. Breath on glass creates a thin film whose contours are indistinct and that does not linger long. Likewise, the paint in many of the works in the exhibition gives the effect of having been applied thinly, of creating forms seen only hazily, and of capturing effects of peculiar ephemerality.” Simpson further explains that this near-illegibility is crucial to the value of the viewer’s experience, much as I argue about the passages of illegibility in trompe l’oeil paintings.

“Only after minutes of quietly looking at such a canvas as Whistler’s *Nocturne in Blue and Silver: The Lagoon, Venice* does the flat patterning of dark and light, with hieroglyphics of shipping and church, open out into a spatial and atmospheric whole. A glance and a mental note of what the painting depicts deny what, in fact, the picture achieves so magically: a mood that, given time, resonates as true within the imagination of each sympathetic viewer.”

He speaks about these paintings as offering an immersive meditative escape, a portal to memory. Such experiences with art make the time you spend fully rich, fully meaningful.

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65 Marc Simpson, *Like Breath on Glass: Whistler, Inness, and the Art of Painting Softly* (Williamstown, Mass.: New Haven: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute; Distributed by Yale University Press, 2008), 3. Note that this exhibition does not use the word Tonalist to describe their paintings. It prefers to call them soft paintings, but there is significant overlap in the paintings that fall under both definitions.


67 Simpson, 10.
Simpson’s explanation of the kind of prolonged looking Tonalist paintings reward matches the effect that I identify in trompe l’oeil paintings—especially in their description of deterioration. What Simpson might term an aesthetic of ephemerality seems to have much in common with the aesthetic of age I have identified in trompe l’oeil painting that reveals and revels in the effects of ephemerality and the signs of decay or deterioration in fugitive materials. Their shared aesthetic has the effect of encouraging slower and more contemplative encounters with the paintings. In both cases, this slowness of viewer interaction served as a historically appropriate response to the increasing concern about the rapidity of modern life.

Vanitas and Trompe l’Oeil

Trompe l’oeil painters created passages of great sensuous beauty through their depictions of aging objects, especially paper. Peto and his fellow painters exploited the relative ephemerality of paper to evoke visual pleasure while also pitting the material durability of paper and painting against each other. In this next section, we will further explore the cultural resonance of ephemerality and durability through the tradition of vanitas and memento mori imagery in trompe l’oeil paintings.

Other than signaling personal psychological distress, scraps of paper and signs of deterioration in trompe l’oeil paintings have been interpreted by a few scholars as representing the fleeting and empty nature of human life and hedonistic pleasures and therefore participating in the tradition of vanitas imagery.68 Chad Mandeles’s and Barbara Groseclose’s research on

several of William Harnett’s paintings give credence to interpreting this iconography in trompe l’oeil paintings, pushing back against the earlier formal stance established by Frankenstein.\textsuperscript{69} I build on their scholarship by focusing on durational viewing through a reading of John Haberle’s *Time and Eternity*. I also explore the salience of the *vanitas* theme as it pertains to the material durability not only of paper-based popular ephemera, but also of the paintings themselves through Harnett’s ‘To This Favour’ pictures.

Harnett’s paintings are in debt to the Dutch tradition of *vanitas* painting from the seventeenth century and the birth of still life as a stand-alone genre. According to Ingvar Bergström, still-life painting became one of the ways in which devout Protestants could continue to express their beliefs visually without reproach in the wake of the Reformation and its accompanying iconoclasm towards overtly religious imagery.\textsuperscript{70} Dutch painters could convey highly sophisticated moral and religious messages through depictions of objects with strong and consistent associations. *Vanitas* paintings were composed, according to Bergström’s useful taxonomy, of three types of imagery: (1) symbols of earthly existence, which include displays of human accomplishment in the arts and sciences, signs of wealth and power, and objects


associated with earthly pleasures—often vices; (2) symbols of the transience of human life, which include time pieces as well as characteristically ephemeral objects like bubbles and flowers, and also skulls, lamps and candles—which inevitably burn out; (3) and symbols of resurrection to eternal life, which tended to be vegetal in the Dutch tradition—ivy, corn, laurels, but moving forward in history to include Christian paraphernalia such as rosaries, crosses, and copies of the Bible. *Vanitas* pictures were not intended to evoke morbidity but to remind people of their spiritual priorities and convince them to live more pious, less materialistic lives. Such pictures often targeted fashionable amusements such as smoking and tulipomania.  

Another crucial element of *vanitas* imagery is time, not just the representation of the passing of time, but the time it takes for the viewer to digest the painting. According to E. De Jongh, and Bergström, *vanitas* pictures were understood to be more valuable if they were difficult to quickly understand. Pondering the significance of each element, trying out multiple interpretations, putting in the work for the reward of the moral teaching—this kind of painting-viewer interaction was thought to be more efficacious to the viewer. The image and the meaning would ultimately be etched more firmly in the viewer’s mind, much like the parables of Christ. Cognitive durability is the result of these protracted, durational interpretive experiences. This quality is thrown into sharp relief by comparison to the depicted material ephemerality of the subject matter and its implication that the viewers themselves are mortal. This contrast is an important part of traditional *vanitas* pictures that, I argue, American nineteenth-century trompe l’œil paintings fully adopted.

Bergström’s taxonomy is certainly useful. When we think about the specific device of

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71 Bergström, *Dutch Still-Life Painting* 154–90. See page 154 for his taxonomy.

decaying paper and all of the general signs of deterioration in the work of Harnett, Haberle, and Peto, they seem to double as both signs of human accomplishment as well as symbols of transience on multiple levels. The new proliferation of photography and printed ephemera represent technological advances. Photographs in and of themselves often remind us that time is always passing—the person you see in the portrait is likely older now, perhaps even deceased.73 New specimens of visual culture also represent the fast pace of culture in which periodic publications like newspapers and journals as well as one-use-only ephemera like tickets or advertisements are so disposable because they will quickly be replaced. The ticket stubs are torn, the stamps are post-marked, and the newspapers are ragged—all indications that the moment of salience and optimal functionality has passed. They may be souvenirs of sorts of memorable or unremarkable life events. Ephemera’s brief functionality matches its physical ephemerality—also a result of the technological development of wood-pulp paper. The layered associations that come with deteriorating ephemera in trompe l’oeil paintings seem to fall in line with De Jongh’s research on Dutch vanitas work that suggests that some artists set out to make paintings with multiple possible interpretations by selecting objects that would pique moral associations without laying out one concise moral message.74 This would of course amplify the desired effect of slowing down both visual comprehension and moral contemplation.

Contemplating Ambiguous Symbols

Harnett has been the focus of the most serious scholarly attention to the connections between trompe l’oeil and vanitas, likely because some of his paintings include skulls. However,

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the title of one of Haberle’s paintings, *Time and Eternity*, makes it another obvious place to look for *vanitas* themes (figure 3.29). Gertrude Grace Sill provides such a reading of this painting in her Haberle catalog, doing the challenging work of identifying the many partially legible elements in Haberle’s composition and forging thematic connections between them. 75 Building on Sill’s work, I offer a reading of Haberle’s painting that demonstrates the complex layering of associations of his ephemeral iconography and its effectiveness in evoking contemplative, studious viewer engagement.

*Time and Eternity* is another trompe l’oeil composition in which the picture plane appears to be level with the frame, and the depicted objects project forward illusionistically. We see a pale wooden plank as the background. In the upper left, we see a pocket watch with a broken glass face dangling from a nail (figure 3.30). The hands indicate it is nearly 2:30. Below the watch, near the bottom, we see a torn away newspaper clipping with the heading still legible: “Time and Eternity. Rob. Ingersoll. Providence, July 4—In the county jail [illegible] trial” (figure 3.31). On the right side of the painting, we see numerous scraps and paper items nailed or pasted to the board, partially covered by a rosary with a simple wooden crucifix hanging in front of the ephemera. The objects under the rosary are: playing cards, paper currency, a lavender theater stub marked *Right C 10*, a pink pawnbroker’s receipt, a cigarette photo of a coy woman with bare arms, an insurance policy, a bookmaker’s receipt, a card with a lucky 7, and there is also a tiny scrap of paper bearing the word “grave”—which is likely from paper currency, forming part of the word “engraved” (figures 3.32-3.33).

The paper items on the right all seem to represent various fleeting pleasures and vices. Gambling takes several forms, from playing cards and the receipt from placing a bet, to

75 Sill, *John Haberle*, 73.
insurance—a sort of reverse gambling, paying into a scheme in hopes never to get the payout—as a way to perhaps stave off disaster. Does the close proximity to the rosary imply that religion too is a form of gambling? Or does religion here represent a trump card of sorts, overpowering the objects beneath? Viewers must see through the lens of their own relationships to religion and spirituality; the painting does not offer a definitive answer. The painting even acknowledges agnosticism through its reference to Robert Ingersoll (1833-1899), the politician, lawyer, and orator. He was famously agnostic and once tried for blasphemy, which seems to be the message of the clipping. We may also perhaps connect Ingersoll’s agnosticism to the more scientific approach to life, which the pocket watch seems to convey.  

The word “grave,” which viewers must get very close to read, brings greater depth and seriousness to the matter. It means both seriousness more generally and implies mortality directly. This crucial scrap appears between the photograph of the bare-shouldered woman and the rosary. The pose of the young woman also suggests double meaning. On one level, with her hands clasped next to her face, and her head turned to the side, she appears demurely coy, both vulnerable and available to the presumably male viewers’ scurrilous gaze. The photograph represents temptation and lust, easy pleasure. The photograph could be intended to contrast the nearby crucifix, presenting the viewer with a moral choice—the stakes made clear by the “grave” paper scrap positioned between them. Read another way, however, we can see the photographed woman clasping her hands in prayer, herself considering the choices of her life as she seems to look towards the word “grave” and the crucifix beyond. This grouping of items suggests a contemplative Mary Magdalen. In this way, she becomes an audience surrogate, encouraging viewers to reflect on the morality of their own histories and relationships with religion. We have

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76 Sill, 73. Sill notes that Ingersoll sold watches in his youth.
seen this kind of dialogue between elements of ephemera before in Haberle’s *A Bachelor’s Drawer* in chapter two, there again suggesting several simultaneous meanings.

The composition of the painting, with objects placed on the right and left side of the painting, seems to echo the divide implied in the title—with time represented on one side and eternity on the other. Closer contemplation of the objects makes that interpretation difficult to sustain. Which side aligns with which word? The two words—and the objects that represent them—are linked across the divide. We notice the shared cyclical components of the clock and the rosary as well as the contrasting mode of manufacture—the mechanical clock versus the hand-made rosary. Both items are intimate, personal, worn or held close to the body. But the watch is broken; we can see the cracks in the glass face implying further damage within. The passing of time—bringing damage and decay, has not only frayed and stained the many paper objects; it has overcome the timepiece itself! Time is then left without measure—one way to conceptualize eternity. So then, does the broken watch represent eternity, or does the rosary with its Christian promise of eternal salvation after death?

Haberle’s painting, in essence, is about the contemplation of spiritual and mundane temporality; it asks viewers to think about how they have and should spend their time in light of their mortality. Though the painting offers many questions to ponder, it does not offer clear or easy answers. As with the image of the woman, multiple readings are possible, even anticipated. Much like the enigmatic Dutch *vanitas* pictures of several hundred years prior, Haberle’s painting calls to its viewers to look slowly and carefully, and as they look, they must ask themselves soul-searching questions about potentially sinful behavior and its relation to religion, the nature of time and salvation, and the vulnerability not only of their mortal coils but also of their material possessions. The time piece is broken, the papers are torn and fragmented. The
word “grave” as part of the word “engraved” subtly reminds viewers of the ephemerality of its printed medium. Slow looking is also encouraged through Haberle’s careful painting style and the minutia of legible and illegible details. Trompe l’oeil paintings draw viewers closer, to inspect the surface, and only at this close distance does some of the iconography become clear—the word “grave,” for instance. Durational looking is both the means and measure of the painting’s success.

Although my interpretation stems from the picture itself, it is worth acknowledging that Haberle’s biography supports the conclusion that the painting affirms the value of spiritual contemplation but does leave room for doubts and questions. In a letter of general life advice to his daughter, Haberle made clear the limits of his own beliefs. He referred to himself as a man of “religious disbelief,” but he went on to say that he was not a bad man, “as bad men smoke, drink, gamble, and dissipate generally.” Despite this, he seems to have had spiritual beliefs of his own that did not align with organized religion. He was curious about and respectful of religions outside of Christianity. Referring to himself in the third person, Haberle wrote, “He sees and knows there is a creative power. He believes a Jew, a Mohammedan, a Buddhist, or any other one can live just as upright a life as a Christian. Your father has attended most of the places of worship exempting the Jewish.” Today, we might think of him as a seeker. At one point in the letter, he poses extremely tough questions about divine justice, “Could you get down on your knees and praise God from whom all blessing flow if your whole family had met death by a power not controlled by man?” He did however, find church to be a good place to go and

77 Sill, 1. Sill published Haberle’s letter to his daughter Vera from 1925 in its entirety at the beginning of her catalogue.
78 Sill, 1.
79 Sill, 1.
contemplate any kind of problem on one’s mind, advising his daughter in times of perplexity to “Go to church and let your subconscious work on the problem as you attune to the mood of worship. Creative spiritual thinking has amazing power to give ‘right’ answers.” Although he had strong doubts about the nature of a divine power, the value of spiritual contemplation is not something that Haberle questioned. Indeed, he found this practice to be deeply connected to his own creativity.

**Memento Mori**

Haberle’s painting demonstrates the preservation of the value of contemplation of ambiguous symbols in nineteenth century trompe l’oeil. If we shift our attention to two of Harnett’s *memento mori* paintings, we find new possibilities for thinking about the nature of physical ephemerality in trompe l’oeil paintings (figures 3.34-3.35). Harnett made two *memento mori* paintings in 1879, both tabletop scenes depicting a skull, an extinguished candle, and several books including a tattered tome of Shakespeare. Looking at the candleholder in each, we notice that the depiction is exactly even with the implied eye line—we can see neither the top nor bottom of its opening sconce. This places the implied viewer quite low for a tabletop composition, as if seated at the table perhaps. Placing the skull so close to the implied horizon line gives the reminder of death an additional zing of poignancy because of the immediacy of looking eye-to-eye socket with a life-sized skull.

In each painting, the starkness of the skull and the brightness of damaged book pages stand out against the dark background, making a clear formal connection between human death and the deteriorating paper. Both paintings feature a poignant, handwritten quote from Shakespeare. In one painting, it is inscribed on a dangling book cover, in the other, it is written

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80 Sill, 5.
on a page whose jagged right edge suggests it was torn from a book. The page and the book cover both hang over the edge of the table to be parallel with the picture plane, extending outward toward the viewer. The same quote, though with different spelling, appears handwritten on the otherwise blank surface, “Now get you to my lady’s chamber, and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favour [or favor] she must come.”

Hamlet speaks this line in Act 5, scene 1. He is out in a graveyard, watching a grave being dug, and toying with the exhumed skull of Yorick, the old court jester. Hamlet is in awe of the ghastly transformation of the cheerful man he knew and loved in childhood and is moved to think about the inevitability of death and decay. Hamlet then addresses the skull directly, jokingly telling it to go talk to Ophelia—the young woman with whom he has a romantic history, but who he now believes has betrayed him. The skull should convince her that no matter how much “paint”—meaning makeup—she applies, she will still end in death and decay. By implying that she wears makeup, Hamlet is insulting Ophelia’s honesty, virtue, and ability to deal with reality. As morbid as it is, the scene has even darker overtones because, unbeknownst to Hamlet, Ophelia has already killed herself, and the grave being dug is for her.

This brilliantly selected quote from *Hamlet* would surely be recognizable to a good portion of American viewers, and perhaps especially in Philadelphia where Harnett lived and worked at this time. The first American Shakespeare club formed in Philadelphia in 1851.  

Shakespeare performances were quite common in America throughout the nineteenth century, often in the form of short vignettes earlier in the century shifting over to more performances of

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the full plays later in the century.\textsuperscript{82} Hamlet was an especial favorite.\textsuperscript{83} People would also have known the work of Shakespeare from the omnipresence of his books—examples of which we see in Harnett’s paintings.\textsuperscript{84} Newspaper advertisers used the absolute prevalence of Shakespeare to situate the importance of other books, with ad formulations such as “No library is complete without a copy of the Bible, Shakespeare, and [book X].”\textsuperscript{85} Compilations of Shakespeare’s works were available in a full range of prices, from cheap cloth-bound editions to volumes clad in expensive Moroccan leather or crushed velvet, enhanced by numerous illustrations.\textsuperscript{86}

In Harnett’s To This Favour paintings, he actually positioned death as the ultimate savvy viewer. Hamlet implicitly accuses Ophelia of attempting to stave off death by applying paint in the form of makeup. Death is not to be fooled by the illusion of youth and health that makeup can convey. Of all the possible Shakespearian quotes to represent in a painting, Harnett choose one that includes the word ‘paint,’ which, pun-like, draws the viewers’ attention back to the medium of the picture and hint at an additional level of meaning. Harnett extends the implication of Hamlet’s quote to suggest the irony and futility of attempting to keep mortality at bay through paint as fine art medium. The ownership of a fine painting may signal wealth, power, and provide a form of material legacy, and yet all of this does not add up to immortality.


\textsuperscript{83} Levine, \textit{Highbrow/Lowbrow}, 13.

\textsuperscript{84} For the popularity of Shakespeare’s books in America, see Levine, 18. For Harnett’s use of Shakespeare’s books as models in his paintings, see Judy L. Larson, “Literary References in Harnett’s Still-Life Paintings,” in \textit{William M. Harnett}, 269–70.

\textsuperscript{85} Garvey, \textit{Writing with Scissors}, 64. In this example, book X was Mark Twain’s patented Scrap-Book.

\textsuperscript{86} Levine, \textit{Highbrow/Lowbrow}, 52.
Harnett’s choice to place the quote on foxed and ragged paper lets the audience know that although Shakespeare’s words and fame may be immortal, the physical manifestation of them—in books, and on paper, is not exempt from the passage of time. By making reference to attempts to use paint to fool or stave off death, the painting also becomes self-referential. Death, decay, and deterioration will overcome even the fine and hallowed art of painting. This painting at once reminds people of the extreme ephemerality of paper, their own mortality, and the inability of painting to either save them or their legacy.

Scholar Virginia Mason Vaughan suggests that American nineteenth-century interest in Shakespeare manifested in characteristically consumerist and materialistic ways, “whether by purchasing souvenir postcards and bric-a-brac in Stratford or keeping scrapbooks at home.”

Harnett’s *memento mori* paintings both acknowledge and—using the content of the play itself—critique this materialistic engagement.

**The Vulnerability of Paintings**

While I earlier argued that trompe l’oeil paintings that represent deteriorating paper imply a contrast to the material of representation—oil paint, here we encounter a complication. Harnett’s use of this quote questions the permanence of paintings. Although less pervasive and obvious than paper deterioration, visual reminders of the vulnerability of paint also haunt multiple trompe l’oeil paintings. Whenever we encounter a painted door or wooden wall as the backdrop of one of the paintings, we also see chips in the depicted paint surface, places where the wood splinters and shows through or where the paint appears to buckle and flake; see, for example, Haberle’s *Imitation*. While the painting of a door and the painting of a picture each hold very different cultural statuses, the material continuity is suggestive and unsettling.

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87 Vaughan, “Shakespeare in America’s Gilded Age,” 345.
What Harnett suggests in words, Peto directly visualizes by representing paintings within his paintings, in what are known as his patch pictures. We have already looked at an example of this in the previous chapter with his painting *Ordinary Objects in the Artist’s Creative Mind* (figure 2.32). There we see a small, unstretched canvas depicted as one of many objects suspended from a wooden door. The canvas’s material flimsiness is apparent as one corner limply droops over and the uneven edges of the canvas fray. The small painting does not look durable or particularly valuable. The effect is even more pronounced in his paintings that are dominated by these smaller canvases, as we see in *Patch Self-Portrait with Small Pictures* (figure 3.36). These paintings seem self-deprecating. They show the work of the artist in an unflattering, un-respected, and vulnerable position. Why make paintings that self-referentially call into question their own physical durability, let alone their power and status?

One viable answer is the growing concern among artists as to the longevity of their work, in light of the emergence of many new experimental techniques, new synthetic pigments, and new materials to mix with paints in order to speed up drying times or heighten gloss. Nineteenth-century artists such William Page, Albert Pinkham Ryder, William W. M Turner, and Milhaly Munkacsy all received criticism during their lifetime and/or afterwards for the impermanence of their paintings. According to stories passed down about Ryder, he insisted he did not care so much about the aging of his paintings as the initial achievement of beauty and brilliance. When asked about his paintings that were already cracking, he replied, “When a thing has the elements of beauty from the beginning it cannot be destroyed. Take for instance Greek sculpture—the

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Venus de Milo I might say—ages and men have ravaged it, its arms and nose have broken off, but it still remains a thing of beauty because beauty was a part of it from the beginning."\(^{89}\) His practice of restoring his own works during the latter part of his career suggests he may have said one thing and felt otherwise.

Certainly, other artists were more overtly distressed about the impermanence of their paintings, especially in academic circles. The fugitive nature of new pigments was a particular concern.\(^ {90}\) William Sidney Mount corresponded at length with European authorities on pigment permanence in the 1850s and 60s.\(^ {91}\) In the 1870s, William Morris Hunt quipped knowingly about Veronese green, “Oh yes, I know that kind of green; the more you put on, the less color you have. It vanishes.”\(^ {92}\) Many artists chose to work with limited palettes during this era, to ensure tonal harmony in their work, and also to avoid the risks of chemical changes in pigments not yet tested by time.\(^ {93}\) New museums were charged to provide the correct temperature, amount of light, and source of light to preserve their paintings—gaslight being considered particularly damaging to certain pigments.\(^ {94}\) By depicting or referencing paintings that fail to pass the test of time, trompe l’oeil painters might have been expressing their concerns for the ultimate fate of their own work, something that no artist can fully control despite scrupulous technique.

\(^{89}\) Ryder quoted in Sherman, *Albert Pinkham Ryder*, 43.


\(^{91}\) Mayer and Myers, 46.

\(^{92}\) Mayer and Myers, 47.

\(^{93}\) Mayer and Myers, 48. As digital restoration efforts by the Art Institute in Chicago and other institutions have shown, not all artists were as careful in selecting their hues. We see this especially in the work of Impressionist painters. There have been dramatic changes in the last century in the appearance of works by Renoir, Morisot, and others.

By looking further back into the origin of *memento mori* and *vanitas* imagery, we find another potential answer to why these painters chose to depict paintings in this vulnerable way.\(^9^5\) *Vanitas* comes from the longer Latin phrase *vanitas vanitatum omnia vanitas*, which comes from the book of Ecclesiastes in the Bible’s Old Testament (Ecc 1:2). The phrase translated into English states “vanity of vanities, all is vanity.” The phrase is commonly understood to refer to the ultimate emptiness or futility of human toil and earthly pursuits; the textual context confirms this interpretation. The author, purportedly King Solomon, frames the limited pleasures and labors of human life against the inevitability of death, the obliteration of the past, and the surpassing power of God. Solomon even recognizes his own search for wisdom, of which this discourse is a part, as vanity. Ultimately, he concludes the book with an admonition to “Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man.” (Ecc 12:13). According to De Pascale, *vanitas* imagery “indicates a particular type of still life in which certain objects or symbolic indicators allude to the brevity of existence, the ephemeral character of worldly pleasures and possessions, and the inexorable flow of time. It is a moralistic iconography that implicitly invites the viewer to be concerned more with eternal salvation than the accumulation of earthly goods.”\(^9^6\) Paintings, as worldly goods themselves, even if they seek to enlighten viewers, must still be considered an embodiment of materialistic vanity.

*Memento mori* imagery, as a subset of *vanitas* imagery, seeks to remind the viewers of their own mortality again coupled with the moral imperative to live upright lives. This concept has been used frequently in the Christian context, extending back to the early Christian era,

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\(^9^5\) For a concise introduction to the concept of *vanitas* and its imagery, see De Pascale, *Death and Resurrection in Art*, 99–101.

\(^9^6\) De Pascale, 99.
building on a possibly apocryphal account of Roman generals.97 It was a custom for the most successful and honored warriors to have slaves whose specific task was to follow them around and repeat the phrase to them, so as to help them avoid hubris that might otherwise arise from their glorious accomplishments.98 Needing to be reminded to stay humble effectively also announces the success of the person being reminded; worldly success and humility cannot be fully separated. In this way, a *memento mori* or *vanitas* painting always functions to underscore the wealth and success of the owner through its form as an expensive work of art, and through its message. They act as performative rejections of materiality. When Peto, Haberle, and Harnett reference the impermanence of paintings within their paintings, they acknowledge and echo the paradoxical nature of the *vanitas* tradition. Such paintings seem to warn viewers not to be deceived into thinking they are truly of eternal value, while also reaffirming the worldly status of paintings.

It is worth noting that the self-referential and self-deprecating gesture of painting a deteriorating painting is not unique to nineteenth-century American trompe l’oeil. See, for example, seventeenth-century Dutch artist Cornelis Gijsbrechts’ *Studio Wall with Vanitas Still Life* (figure 1.10) and eighteenth-century Italian painter Sebastiano Lazzari’s *Trompe l’Oeil Still Life* (figure 3.37). The depiction of a deteriorating painting seems to be an inevitable result of following the moral logic of *vanitas* to its conclusion.

The word vanity is etymologically linked to emptiness and fleetingness, which makes it especially compatible with the trompe l’oeil form. Victor Stoichită theorized that *vanitas* and illusionism naturally go together. “The connection between illusionism and *vanitas* is no

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97 The early Christian writer Tertullian wrote that Roman generals celebrating a triumph would have an attendant to remind them they were men and not gods, to remember their own mortality (Apology 33.3).

98 De Pascale, *Death and Resurrection in Art*, 86–92.
accident; it is inevitable: The nearer an image gets to real space by covering it, the more the supra temporal nature of the artistic image is called into question: having left the beyond, the imaginary eternity, it will become a ‘fallen’ image in order to invade the downhere, the world of mortals.”

By this, Stoichiță meant that the more illusionistic the artist attempts to be with transient subject matter, the more details of the passing of time, of aging, the artist will need to capture in order to be convincing. This naturally serves as a *vanitas*.

We can also think about the connection between trompe l’oeil and *vanitas* through the idea of deception. Trompe l’oeil paintings, through their extreme illusionism, attempt to convince the viewer that a flat façade is a three-dimensional object of substance. The process of looking at a trompe l’oeil painting is about gaining perspective; the moment of disillusionment might be one of recognition of the viewer’s own fallible vision and understanding. With the inclusion of *vanitas* imagery, the idea of perspective takes on moral connotations. The viewer may recognize shallow insubstantiality both visually and conceptually. The viewer needs to become disabused of the idea of the permanence and value of the depicted worldly symbols just as he or she must recognize the visual illusion.

**Iconoclasm**

The signs of aging on the subject matter in trompe l’oeil paintings indicate a tiered hierarchy of durability of visual media and warn viewers against misplacing their faith in material wealth while also simultaneously reaffirming the owner’s worldly success. The signs of wear and tear that so strongly suggest the passing of time and the fleeting nature of human accomplishment, as well as different materials’ varying levels of ability to preserve those accomplishments, also form a part of larger iconoclastic impulses within trompe l’oeil painting.

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Time is not the only implied threat to the longevity of visual culture, up to and including paintings. Fire, vandalism, and clumsy handling all pose threats within various trompe l’oeil paintings. In numerous paintings by Harnett, Haberle, and Peto, we see glowing embers in a pipe or a cigarette butt, resting dangerously near paper items (figures 3.38-3.40). Sometimes, the painters place the smoking cigarette so that it appears to be resting on the frame of the painting, rather than part of the painting itself, implying a second layer of visual illusion. Depending on their level of visual penetration, viewers might momentarily be frightened that either the subject matter or the painting will summarily ignite. Haberle and Peto both play with including depictions of chalk designs in their paintings, which may be mistaken for vandalism on the paintings (figures 3.41-3.44). Haberle’s slate paintings further imply the threat of erasure. Haberle, who seems to have been the keenest to explicitly threaten his own paintings, also had a series of torn-in-transit paintings that depict torn postal packages, with brown paper ripped away from a painting beneath (figures 3.14-3.16). These paintings again show the fragility of paper compared to paintings, but they also communicate to the viewer that the paintings themselves are at great risk for damage.

Iconoclasm has historically meant the physical destruction of works of art, such as the infamous historic events during the Protestant Reformation in which Protestants destroyed works of religious art they believed functioned as icons. Today, we find further resonance in the term because to call an artist an iconoclast can mean that he or she created art that challenges prior definitions of art. Both meanings are applicable to nineteenth century American trompe l’oeil paintings.

Trompe l’oeil painters can be considered iconoclastic in the modern sense simply through their extraordinary illusionism. If viewers are uncertain if they are looking at real or depicted
objects, the painting’s status as a painting is under threat, at least temporarily. The humor and theatricality inherent in this illusionistic trick further undermined the seriousness of fine art. By painting such unusual subject matter including mass-produced objects of popular visual culture, trompe l’oeil painters further pushed the boundaries of traditional art. On its bright surface, such subject matter is light, frivolous, and again, antithetical to the idea of serious, moral art. Jennifer Greenhill argued that during the Gilded Age, humor became a polarizing force in American art, with high art striving to be serious. Witty or funny art was consigned to middle class culture, understood as pandering to the masses rather than elevating viewers through sophistication. As Greenhill points out, humor can often make cultural critique more palatable, a dynamic trompe l’oeil artists took advantage of in their deprecating depictions of other visual media, and—probably more difficult to swallow—their insistence on the threat time holds over material legacy and human life itself.

This iconoclastic mechanism is similar to the concept of the sublime, in which a viewer experiences the thrill of danger from a position of relative safety. Who can deny the fascination of objects on the brink of destruction? The precarity and potential for loss may render the paintings ultimately more precious. The illusory component heightens the tensions—is the destruction part of a continuous space with the viewer or not? Because of the tempering effects of the inherent levity of trompe l’oeil, however, the situation never becomes too dire.

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100 I am borrowing the term theatricality from Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980). Trompe l’oeil paintings have a sort of scripted mode of viewer interaction—looking, being startled or uncertain, looking closer, understanding the trick, looking longer and engaging with both the illusion and the subject matter. They call attention to the phenomenological experience of the viewer, and their meaning is wrapped up in the viewer’s protracted engagement. Fried claimed that this self-consciousness that so-called theatrical works promoted in their viewers detracted from the power of that work to absorb the viewer’s attention and thereby detracted from the potency of its meaning. This is not unlike Ruskin’s complaint about imitative art, see note 64.

101 On the humor in Haberle’s paintings, see Greenhill, *Playing It Straight*, 139-163.
All of these iconoclastic images, depicting imminent or potential demise for the paintings, do so by implying unworthy viewers, people who treat the paintings with inadequate respect and care. Who would scribble in chalk on a painting? Who would leave a smoldering cigarette balanced on the frame? Who would be so careless in shipping a painting that they would allow the packaging to rip? Some viewers may read these paintings as instructing them to behave appropriately by depicting the opposite, allowing them to feel superior and perhaps righteously indignant on behalf of the paintings.

Trompe l’oeil paintings have a high level of theatricality in their mode of engaging viewers that unfolds and deepens over time. Perhaps viewers are initially attracted to the paintings for the entertainment factor of their illusionism. The subject matter, often so accessible and fun, then invites viewers to extend their gazes beyond discovering the trick. Passages of partial or total illegibility call the viewer to closely inspect the work—an act that is rewarded by minute details and extremely fine facture. Without this very close, careful looking, viewers of Haberle’s *Time and Immortality* would miss the deeper layers of meaning implied by the word “grave” and by the broken watch face. The viewer may linger to enjoy the aesthetics of age that soften aspects of the painting. Stepping back again, viewers may more fully register the *vanitas* qualities of the portrayed media as subject matter and consider the relative durability and value of painting versus more popular visual media such as prints and photographs. Viewers may even question the cultural value traditionally associated with paintings as they consider the ultimate fate of obliteration awaiting all humans and their accomplishments on earth. Alternatively, the drama and the implicit threats to the painting may move viewers to become more directly involved, and rescue—i.e. purchase—the paintings. Further, the possibility of purchasing the
paintings also offers viewers the chance to humbly boast about their own wealth, cultural capital, and moral positions.

Through the depiction of deterioration of both printed and painted objects, these self-reflexive paintings offer paradoxes, questions, and irony. They encourage viewers to engage with them at length—both visually and mentally. These trompe l’oeil paintings’ multi-layered and complex demands on viewers ensure their cognitive durability.
Chapter 4: Ephemera, Identity, and Control in Rack Paintings

Peto’s Office Board for Dr. Goldberg

Bernard M. Goldberg, M.D., emigrated from Germany to Philadelphia in the late 1870s, married Sallie Kucker, a native Pennsylvanian, and they had a son, Harold, in 1879.¹ Bernard’s father was, reportedly, a famous doctor in Europe, and Bernard and his six brothers all pursued medical careers.² In 1883, at the age of 28, Bernard was part of the second graduating class of the Medico-Chirurgical College of Philadelphia.³ He was a dedicated chiropodist with an active practice, and he also contributed to the training of other surgeons and doctors. The same year as his graduation, he was listed as an “assistant to the chair of surgery” at the college and an “instructor in digital injuries.”⁴ He made home visits to his patients during mornings and evenings and held office hours in the afternoon.⁵ His English must have been impeccable as he delivered lectures, published reports of medical lectures given by other doctors, and co-authored a book on a wide range of medical treatments published in 1886.⁶ His reputation exceeded the Philadelphia city limits. His endorsement for Darby’s Prophylactic Fluid appeared in a New


² Untitled advertisement beginning “Thousands Would Gladly Testify,” The Philadelphia Inquirer, August 9, 1903, 9, America’s Historical Newspapers.


⁴ “Notes About Town,” The North American, October 5, 1883, 1, Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers.

⁵ Bolger, “Early Rack Paintings,” 72.

⁶ Dr. Goldberg is listed as the reporter of a speech delivered by Frank O. Nagle, “Original Department: Lecture. The Rational Treatment of Typhoid Fever,” Medical and Surgical Reporter (1858-1898); Philadelphia 49, no. 12 (September 22, 1883): 309, ProQuest. Notice of a lecture given by Goldberg can be found in "Notes About Town" cited in note 4. See also his co-authored book: Alexander Hazard, Bernard M Goldberg, and Abraham S Gerhard, Pocket Medical Formulary, Arranged Therapeutically, (Philadelphia: Collins, 1886).
Orleans publication in 1886, and notice of his death in 1890 was printed in Pittsburg as well as Philadelphia.⁷

In Philadelphia, a town with a deep history of medical preeminence, doctors could be held in high esteem. Thomas Eakin’s controversial portrait of Dr. Gross signaled, among other things, local pride in the city’s contribution to the progress of medicine (figure 4.1). During his all too brief career, Dr. Goldberg seems to have been dedicated to the idea of enhancing the respectability of medical practitioners. The dedication of his book, *Pocket Medical Formulary, Arranged Therapeutically*, is a testament to his ambitions for his peers. “The busy and hard-worked Practitioner of the United States is entitled to the respect, confidence, and consideration of his fellow-practitioners no less than to that of the general community; and therefore to him this Little Volume is most humbly and sincerely dedicated by The Authors.”⁸ Perhaps this wish for higher regard was the impetus for Dr. Goldberg’s purchase of a painting, *Office Board*, made by his neighbor John F. Peto in 1885 (figure 4.2).⁹

Peto painted the canvas with vertical woodgrain and small knots, to evoke the appearance of rough wooden boards. Narrow pink ribbon, nailed to the boards, forms a letter rack: a large square, divided into four squares, with Xs connecting all the corners. The broken strand of ribbon in the lower right corner dangles loosely. A cabinet card photograph of Dr. Goldberg is tucked

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⁷ See Goldberg’s endorsement for Darby’s prophylactic fluid, one of the many small items under the heading “Domestic Hygiene” *The Southwestern Christian Advocate* [New Orleans], April 1, 1886, 6. Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers. His obituary can be found in *The Times* of Philadelphia, see note 3. He was also listed among recent deceased in *The Pittsburg Dispatch*, January 4, 1890, 5. He was then part of a compiled list the following year of notable local and nation figures who died the previous year: “The Grim Messenger” *The Pittsburg Dispatch*, January 1, 1891, 6.

⁸ Hazard, Goldberg, and Gerhard, *Pocket Medical Formulary*, iii.

⁹ See Bolger, “Early Rack Paintings,” see especially 72. Bolger convincingly argues that Peto’s rack paintings that underwent significant changes in composition were altered to fit a different potential patron. Bolger notes that *Office Board* was not altered, and so she concludes that the original patron, Dr. Goldberg, was likely the purchaser.
into the ribbon near the top, between two paper-bound journals or pamphlets. We see a postal card and several letters addressed to his office at 1208 Chestnut Street with postmarks from March 10 and April 10. An open magazine hangs from the central nail of the letter rack, revealing an illustration—possibly a wood engraving—of Trenton High Falls, with two columns of illegible printed text below. \(^\text{10}\) Behind the open magazine, we see another magazine or booklet with a bright red cover and a bold yellow title, ending in “ker.” A bent green ticket stub partially obscures the postal card. On the board, around the edges of the letter rack, we see two pasted newspaper clippings, a few shreds of colorful labels, a loop of string, scraps of cards, and a math problem written faintly in chalk.

How did this painting of an assortment of paper objects—many of them torn, ragged, and illegible—appeal to Goldberg and his family, friends, or patients who encountered it? To them, did this represent a random accumulation of objects or a meaningful collection? How did historical viewers interpret the painting, and what meaning or meanings did they glean? Why not purchase a more traditional portrait? What did this painting offer that a simple enlargement of his photographic portrait could not satisfy? \(^\text{11}\)

*Office Board* is one of Peto’s many letter rack style paintings. \(^\text{12}\) Peto made his first rack picture in 1879, *Office Board for Smith Brothers Coal Company* (figure 1.20) and returned to the

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11 To have a photographic portrait enlarged and reproduced as a painting was apparently a fairly common practice. See “Painting Photographs in Oil,” *The Art Amateur; A Monthly Journal Devoted to Art in the Household (1879-1903)*, August 1882, 52, ProQuest; see also “The Use of Photography by Artists,” *The Art Amateur; A Monthly Journal Devoted to Art in the Household (1879-1903)*: New York, November 1889, 136, ProQuest.

12 For more on Peto’s letter rack paintings up to 1885, see Bolger, “Early Rack Paintings,” 58-81. For an analysis of Peto’s letter rack paintings throughout his career, see Wilmerding, *Important Information Inside*, 183-234. Both Bolger and Wilmerding note a conspicuous lack of rack pictures during the middle of Peto’s career, between 1885 and 1894. Peto’s Rack Picture from 1887 came to light in 1999, according to an email to the author from the
form consistently through the rest of his career. William Harnett, who was also in Philadelphia in 1879 and a friend of Peto’s, painted and displayed a rack picture a little later that same year *The Artist’s Letter Rack* (figure 3.7). Harnett made only one other rack picture: *Mr. Hulings’ Rack Picture* (figure 3.8), in 1888. A few other trompe l’oeil artist also experimented with this form, but Peto was by far the most dedicated and prolific. Flemish artists first explored and popularized the letter rack form as a device in trompe l’oeil paintings in the middle of the seventeenth-century (figure 4.3). We can trace the motif’s voyage into late nineteenth century American painting only partially.

Rack pictures such as *Office Board* concentrate many of the questions of this study as well as raise several new ones. In rack pictures, we find the most frequent depictions of paper-

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Thomas H. and Diane DeMell Jacobsen PhD Foundation, November 6, 2014. Note that this is later than Bolger’s and Wilmerding’s publications.

13 Gerdts discovered that Peto had in fact preceded Harnett in painting a letter rack picture. The opposite had long been assumed as Peto has traditionally been cast as a follower of Harnett. See William H. Gerdts, *Painters of the Humble Truth: Masterpieces of American Still Life, 1801-1939* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press; Philbrook Art Center, 1981) 182.

14 Wilmerding discusses Thomas Hope as a follower of Peto and reproduces one of his rack paintings in *Important Information Inside*, 217, 220–21. See also *Rack Picture for Dr. Nones*, attributed to William A. Mitchell, 1879 in the collection of the Art Institute of Chicago, Reference Number: 2000.135. Mitchell and Nones were also Philadelphia residents, so it seems likely that the output of Peto and Harnett inspired this painting.


17 It is interested to note that the rack picture form has been strongly associated with the American trompe l’oeil painting since its ‘rediscovery’ in the 1940s. Olive Bragazzi discusses and reproduces an advertisement created by the Downtown Gallery in the guise of a trompe l’oeil letter rack to promote the exhibition of paintings that were
based ephemera, very often with clear signs of deterioration. Wood engraved prints from
illustrated periodicals, chromolithograph trade cards, cabinet cards and cigarette photographs,
torn and folded envelopes, tatters of newspaper clippings, dangling corners of a card ripped
away; the persistence and significance of these individual items across many trompe l’oeil
paintings inspired the previous two chapters. Investigating these elements revealed the complex
intermeshing of visual media and the particular concerns for the longevity of visual culture. In
chapter two, I argued that trompe l’oeil artists remediated print and photographic images in order
to exploit their communicative powers and broaden the audience for painting. In chapter three, I
explored trompe l’oeil painters’ fixation on paper deterioration, positing that by depicting
ephemera in a state of decay, these painters sought to call their viewers’ attention to the relative
longevity—of both material and meaning—of painting.

Rather than focus on another isolated aspect of trompe l’oeil iconography, this chapter
aims to interpret trompe l’oeil paintings as cohesive compositions, considering what and how the
fragmented pieces of ephemera mean in concert. To that end, I anchor this chapter in rack
tickets. Again and again, we encounter printed and photograph images, letters, postcards,
newspapers and newspaper clippings, and sometimes trade cards or greeting cards, labels and
ticket stubs. By studying these depicted collections of ephemera, we gain new insight into the
way that trompe l’oeil painters responded to developments in print and photographic
technologies and the cultural practices that grew up in tandem with the new technologies. These
painters engaged with popular visual culture in ways that acknowledge both its values and
limitations, to position painting at the apex of the changing visual ecology.

believed to be Harnett's work. See Bragazzi, “The Story behind the Rediscovery of William Harnett and John Peto
by Edith Halpert and Alfred Frankenstein,” American Art Journal 16, no. 2 (1984): 54–57,
Letter Racks and Scrapbooks

We know that letter racks persisted as objects in the real world from accounts of how to make such items in contemporary household manuals. Also, written reactions to rack pictures make it clear that Harnett and Peto’s viewers saw nothing unusual in these forms. For example, L. Placide Canonge describes one of Peto’s paintings on display in New Orleans in 1886. “Imagine a canvas representing one of these portfolios on wooden boards that one sometimes sees affixed to the wall, on the partition of a desk or counter.” Canonge goes on to describe the “trellis whose panes are formed of rose stripes” and the objects caught in its “meshes.” Even though this particular painting has now been lost, the description is consistent with many of Peto’s rack pictures, and Canonge’s comment about these boards “that one sometimes sees” speaks to the routine presence of letter racks out in the world.

Letter racks were useful to store lightweight and flat items—likely mostly paper-based—for an intermediate amount of time. A picture of a friend might bring the owner pleasure. A letter might serve as a reminder to reply. A pamphlet or newspaper clipping might keep relevant information easily accessible. Items can be moved around, re-grouped, added and removed, with

18 Frank R. Stockton and Marian E. Stockton, *The Home: Where It Should Be and What to Put in It* (New York: Putnam, 1873), 166; C. S. Jones and Henry T. Williams, *Household Elegancies: Suggestions in Household Art and Tasteful Home Decorations* (New York: Henry T. Williams, publisher, 1877), 139–59. These suggestions for how to make letter racks are quite elaborate, perhaps an attempt to refine or enhance the relatively simple versions we see in rack pictures.

19 A letter racks features prominently in Edgar Allen Poe’s *The Purloined Letter* (1844). While this is several decades too early to be directly applicable to interpreting trompe l’oeil rack pictures, the letter rack in the story looks so innocuous that the important information it contains is initially overlooked. It is wonderfully suggestive of the power of the seemingly ordinary to hide something secret in plain sight.


21 “un treillis dont les losanges sont forms par un galon rose” and “les mailles,” in Canonge, “Boutade de Peintre.”
ease. Users could place items in the rack to keep them organized and at hand, more visible and distinct from papers kept in a stack or strewn across a desk.

Letter racks were one of several tools to manage the inexorable flow of printed materials. The combined effects of technological innovations in photography, printing techniques, paper formulation, along with new efficiencies in communication and transportation, meant that the production and distribution of printed materials in the US vastly amplified. New newspapers and illustrated magazines formed and grew beyond a local readership. New items like chromolithographed trade cards made pictures abundantly available. Unique images could be multiplied in a variety of photographic and print media.

The surge in availability transformed the visual ecology and predicated new ways of looking. Billposters lined city streets, the new pasted over the remnants of the old. Bright colors and bold script demanded attention. Pictures were more available than ever to decorate the home, and there were far more newspapers and journals than anyone could read thoroughly. Trying to give full attention to all that was novel would be exhausting, as George Beard

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described in his work on neurasthenia. People developed habits or systems of scanning and selecting what was of most interest and of excluding or ignoring what they deemed as superfluous.

Letter racks were useful for separating out what was most important, for focusing attention. While paintings like Office Board preserve the appearance of letter racks, the historical objects themselves did not survive to support a direct comparative study. However, rack paintings hint at another form of sorting, organizing, and preserving ephemera: the widespread practice of scrapbook making. The paintings represent some items pasted directly onto the backboards, much as people pasted assorted ephemera onto pages of scrapbooks. Gluing was a more permanent way to attach an item than resting it within ribbon webbing. The paintings, with their even greater degree of permeance and fixity, are more akin to scrapbooks in this way and contrast with the fluidity of their letter rack models.

If we look closely at Office Board, we find an even more direct connection to scrapbooking. There is something odd about the open magazine with the picture of Trenton High Falls and the two columns of text (figure 4.4). The picture and text share a light gray background, but the margin surrounding them on the page is bright white. There are also faint dark lines along the bottom and right side of the picture, as well as around the edges of the two columns of text. Notice especially the lines in between the two columns. Such an effect would make sense if the picture and text were clipped from other sources with different paper and

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26 People actually did glue scraps directly onto doors. This is marvelously preserved in the nursery of The Evergreens, a nineteenth-century historic house on the Emily Dickinson Museum property in Amherst, MA. My thanks to Nan Wolverton of the American Antiquarian Society for bringing it to my attention. There is also written evidence of this practice. Ella Rodman Church proscribed pasting cut out illustrations directly onto the panels of the doors of children's rooms with gilt frames nailed over the illustrations. See Church, *How to Furnish a Home* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1882), 100–102, https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/008927744.
neatly pasted into the booklet. The picture could well be from Nathaniel Parker Willis’s
*American Scenery*, which featured steel engravings after drawings by William Henry Bartlett. The engraving of Trenton High Falls is remarkably similar to the image in Peto’s paintings, except that Peto seems to have cropped the picture, cutting roughly two inches from the right side (figure 4.5). What we see is a scrapbook, I argue, and not a magazine.

Scrapbooks—which survive in archives, antique stores, and private collections in great numbers—preserve ephemera that people intentionally selected, gathered, and arranged. In seeking to understand how historical audiences would have interpreted rack pictures, scrapbooks have proved an invaluable resource. Comparing rack pictures and scrapbooks crystalizes the significant similarities and differences in audience and function. Scrapbooks reveal the historical audiences’ expectations, attractions, and interpretive impulses that the painters manipulated. I argue that we find in scrapbooks a desire to personalize and preserve ephemera, and through doing so, an attempt to gain a sense of stability and control in an increasingly fluid and fast-paced visual culture. Trompe l’oeil painters responded to these desires by creating works of art

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27 Nathaniel Parker Willis, *American Scenery: Or, Land, Lake, and River Illustrations of Transatlantic Nature* (London: George Virtue, 1840); the engraving is on an unnumbered page between 106–107. Wilmerding identified the image’s likely source but does not comment on its change in dimensions or draw the conclusion that we are viewing a scrapbook. See Wilmerding, *Important Information Inside*, 219.

28 While many scrapbooks survive, we must consider the biases of the archives, and the collecting guidelines that dictated what would be saved and what would not. See Ellen Gruber Garvey, *Writing with Scissors: American Scrapbooks from the Civil War to the Harlem Renaissance* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 209–210. My own research into the conventions of scrapbooks was limited to approximately 50 of the scrapbooks preserved in the American Antiquarian Society that date to the late nineteenth century, with the addition of a few scrapbooks that have been fully reproduced in recent publications or online. To better understand the form, I have also relied on historical writing on scrapbooks, most notably Gurley, *Scrap-Books*, and C. A. Montresor, *Some Hobby Horses, or, How to Collect Stamps, Coins, Seals, Crests & Scraps* (London, W.H. Allen & Co., 1890). Several recent secondary sources on scrapbooking in America have also shaped my understanding of the form: Garvey, *Writing with Scissors*; Jessica Helfand, *Scrapbooks: An American History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008); Susan Tucker, Katherine Ott, and Patricia Buckler, eds., *The Scrapbook in American Life* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2006).
that represent printed and photographic forms that go further to meet the underlying needs of personalization, permanence, and control.

Trompe l’oeil painters relied on their viewers to have already developed the visual and cultural competency necessary to make sense of groupings of fragmented ephemera. This was a reasonable prerequisite because scrapbooking was extremely popular during the late nineteenth century. Scrapbooking provided a method of coping with the onslaught of print and visual culture. As the century waned, texts and images became available and accessible to the point of excess, which led to a sense of media saturation. There was too much to take in, too much to process. To people who were accustomed to the relative rarity of texts and images, the increases in production and availability of printed materials could be overwhelming. Julia Colman, a writer for the Ladies Repository lamented in 1873, “We have so many old newspapers that we cannot afford house-room for them all.” As print culture became increasingly industrialized, people had to change their habits of consumption.

While scrapbooks predate this period, they became much more prevalent with the influx of printed matter, to the point of commercial production of blank scrapbooks, specialized materials, and regular columns in periodicals designated “for the scrapbook” (figures 4.6-4.7).

29 Garvey, Writing with Scissors, 3-24.

30 This line is given to the character, Mrs. May, in Colman's vignette, “Among the Scrap-Books,” The Ladies’ Repository (August 1873), 89. Quoted in Garvey, Writing with Scissors, 7.

31 Michel Butor, in thinking about the change in the value of books after the invention of the printing press, talks about how when books were made individually, copied by hand, those who owned them expected to revisit the same book often because they had access to so few. When books became mass produced, people tending to think of reading as "consuming" a book. This observation, while unsupported by any cited evidence, is provocative. We may suppose that this tendency intensified as printing and other book-making technologies advanced. See Butor, “The Book as Object,” in Inventory, ed. Richard Howard, trans. Patricia Dreyfus (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1969), 42.

32 On the widespread nature of scrapbooking, see Garvey, Writing with Scissors, 3-24. Garvey dedicates an entire chapter to pre-fabricated, commercial scrapbooks, focusing on Mark Twain’s patented scrapbooks (60-86).
Across the spectrums of age, gender, race, and social class, people began making scrapbooks to organize and preserve their collections. Unlike today, when scrapbooking is an activity strongly associated with middle class women, scrapbook makers of the nineteenth century seem to have been highly diverse.\(^{33}\) Their scrapbooks demonstrate the transformative creativity of their makers who successfully made new, unique entities from diverse fragments. They personalized mass-produced print matter and preserved ephemera.

Despite some degree of commercialization, there was extraordinary diversity among scrapbooks in terms of form and function. Many people eschewed pre-fabricated blank albums in favor of repurposing unwanted, extant books.\(^ {34}\) Some people collected items pertaining to certain themes, while others had more inclusive and less strictly thematic collections. Some scrapbooks seem to exist simply to give book form to a serially published story. Others document personal histories or career-related activities. Some consist solely of pictures. Some contain only newspaper clippings. All, however, shared similar concerns with selecting, arranging, and

\(^{33}\) For the diversity of nineteenth-century American scrapbook makers, see Garvey, *Writing with Scissors*, 10; See also Garvey's chapter dedicated to African American scrapbooks, 131-171. Garvey presents the most recent and thoroughly researched treatise on American scrapbook making and convincingly argues that it was an activity that people across all demographics (age, gender, race, class) enjoyed. Deborah A. Smith, in an article mostly about trade card albums, identifies children as the target demographic for scrapbook making, though she offers quite a few contradictory examples. See Smith, “Consuming Passions: Scrapbooks and American Play,” *Ephemera Journal* 6 (n.d.): 63–76. Anne Higonnet's essay on nineteenth-century European album making classes the activity as a form of feminine self-expression, thought she does note that men made albums too. She interprets women's albums as articulating a relational or social sense of self. Her study focuses on earlier nineteenth century albums that combined original sketches and paintings with printed materials. Higonnet's claim that women's albums exhibit a consistent femininity would be strengthened by a comparison to men's albums, which she does not offer in this article. See Higonnet, “Secluded Vision: Images of Feminine Experience in Nineteenth-Century Europe,” *Radical History Review* 1987, no. 38 (May 1, 1987): 17–36, https://doi.org/10.1215/01636545-1987-38-16. According to Helfand, the scrapbook industry underwent a major revival and transformation in the 1980s. Since then, purpose-made scrapbooking supplies have done much to homogenize most scrapbooking practices. The use of more and more ready-made stamps, decorative flourishes, text bubbles, etc., has drastically reduced the connections to broader, more diverse source material, making it a more insular practice with less ties to the external world. See Helfand, *Scrapbooks*, 166.

\(^{34}\) As Garvey surmised, the repurposing of an old book as a scrapbook demonstrated the scrapbook maker's power to choose what text is worth saving. By obliterating unwanted content in order to preserve their own selected content, the scrapbook makers might have been attempting to usurp the authority of published books. See Garvey, *Writing with Scissors*, 52–59.
preserving paper ephemera for future viewing. It is in this way that they provide insight into the significance of rack pictures.

**Memorabilia Scrapbooks: Public Source Material and Private Meaning**

“…for the contents of these books, though written by authors unknown to me, and written for the public, are yet such true interpretations of my own feelings, that they show the secret history and aspirations of my soul.”

While many scrapbooks display strong thematic principles, others are highly idiosyncratic, the epitome of which are memorabilia scrapbooks. Thematic scrapbooks seem to emulate encyclopedias or textbooks, whereas memorabilia scrapbooks are more akin to personal diaries. Their makers did often include texts and images that they thought would be edifying for later viewing or reading, but they also included the ephemera from events they attended,

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35 Gurley, expounding about his own scrapbooks, *Scrap-Books*, 16.

36 The two most thorough period guides to scrapbook making both prescribe making scrapbooks that adhere to certain themes. E. W. Gurley thought of scrapbooks as like amateur encyclopedias. While one’s scraps were not selected with themes in mind, they were organized by themes later—the idea being that specific scraps would be easier to find when needed if like went with like. See Gurley, *Scrap-Books*, 18–19. C. A. Montresor encouraged the thematic selection of scraps as a form of self-discipline in one’s hobby, training up the mind to be orderly and systematic. See Montresor, *Some Hobby Horses*, iii-39, see especially iii-5. Many scrapbooks align with the thematic approach advocated by Gurley and Montresor. A few examples that I encountered: Nathanial Paine carefully pieced together a book on what he termed, borrowing the phrase from circuses, “Freaks of Nature.” See Paine, scrapbook, “Freaks of Nature” 1891, Mss. Octavo Vols., American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, MA. William Blemly dedicated a scrapbook to the career of his friend William Harnett, and in doing so created an invaluable repository of primary sources on Harnett for future scholars. See Blemly, “Blemly Scrapbook.” Some scrapbook makers limited their source material to create a more homogenous collection. Alfred S. Roe’s theme of “Contemporary Biography” consisted almost exclusively of printed obituaries. See Roe, “Scrap Books: Contemporary Biography” (1879), Mss., Accession, R, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, MA. Roe meticulously indexed his entries; his scrapbooks are some of the most systematically organized that I have encountered. Many scrapbooks contain only pictorial trade or greeting cards. For an exemplary example, see “Trade Card Scrapbook” 1880-1900, Graphic Arts Bound Volumes F005 F, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, MA. For a recent analysis of trade card scrapbooks, see Ellen Gruber Garvey, "Scrapbook, Wishbook, Prayerbook: Trade-Card Scrapbooks and the Missionary Work of Advertising," in The Scrapbook in American Life, 97-115. See also Smith, “Consuming Passions,” 63-76.

37 For more on the definition and range of contents of memorabilia scrapbooks, see Garvey, *Writing with Scissors*, 16-18. For beautiful reproductions and discussion of specific examples of memorabilia scrapbooks from the early to mid-twentieth century, see Helfand, *Scrapbooks*. Claire Farago et al. investigate the forms of scrapbooks in conjunction with the formation of memories, “‘Scraps as It Were’: Binding Memories,” *Journal of Victorian Culture* 10, no. 1 (January 1, 2005): 114–22, https://doi.org/10.3366/jvc.2005.10.1.114.
letters received from friends, dance cards, locks of hair, ticket stubs, receipts, pamphlets, the occasional photograph, sometimes even full broadsides folded up to fit onto the page. They are the most heterogeneous type of scrapbook, and as such, they most closely relate to the rack paintings in terms of subject matter.

For example, Clarence Winthrop Bowen’s college years scrapbook has everything from threatening fraternity hazing cards to registrar receipts, to letters (with their envelopes) from his parents, to dance cards, to small items he contributed to local newspapers, to obituaries of his family members and childhood friends, to invitations to formal dinners—all arranged in a loosely chronological way (figure 4.8). Mary Elizabeth Whiton Washburn collected pictures of ships and European royal family members, along with letters from her children, printed notices of their achievements and exam sheets, printed tips for housewives, local marriage notices, and hand-copied poems (figure 4.9). Both of these examples give us a sense not of a coherent theme but of consistent and complex makers.

Like memorabilia scrapbooks, rack pictures typically represent the collection of assorted ephemera of specific individuals. We know that Harnett painted Mr. Hulings Rack Picture on commission for George H. Hulings, a dry goods merchant in Philadelphia. Peto’s rack paintings, too, typically point to specific historical individuals who may have commissioned the works, or he may have made them on speculation.

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38 Clarence Winthrop Bowen, “Scrapbook, Vol II,” 1869-1882, Bowen Family Papers 1847-1934, Mss. Folio volumes B, vol. 3, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, MA. Clarence Bowen (1852-1935), kept 37 scrapbooks between the years of 1864 and 1933, many of which overlap in date ranges. This particular scrapbook contains materials from his four years at college through his earning a PhD at Yale in 1882.


Researching the names and addresses visible in Peto’s rack pictures, as Doreen Bolger did, led to unexpected results. Bolger deduced that Peto made his first rack picture *Office Board for Smith Bros. Coal Co* as a display piece. The names that appear in the painting, “John Smith” and “Dr. Jones,” are highly generic, the Smith Bros. Coal Company named on the trade card does not seem to have existed, and the address for “John Smith” was Peto’s own studio address at the time. From the historical account given of the making of Peto’s painting *The Ocean Country Democrat*, it seems that Peto began making office boards on speculation, gathering ephemera related to the prospective buyer, making the painting, and then attempting to sell it to him (figure 4.10). Pentimenti and x-ray photographs of some of Peto’s rack pictures reveal significant changes—adding or removing addressed letters, changing photographs, etc. Based on this evidence, Bolger concluded that Peto changed his compositions when they did not sell, personalizing them to another buyer—either on commission or again on speculation. William Michal Bunn and Christian Faser both seem to have been real people that Peto plausibly might have known (figures 3.41 and 4.11). In most of the early paintings made prior to Peto’s move to Island Heights, NJ in 1889, the depicted items seem to be intended to evoke the relationships or experiences of specific persons.

In his later rack pictures, Peto seems to have shifted away from targeting specific patrons, depicting photographs of famous people, like Beethoven or, more frequently, Abraham Lincoln, and leaving the address of letters largely illegible (figure 4.12). Scholars have speculated that


42 On the major change in Peto’s career marked by his move to Island Heights, see Frankenstein, *After the Hunt*, 18, 101-111.
these later period works are more about introspection and formal experimentation. Peto’s own cares, concerns, interests seem to come to the fore in these paintings, which likely feature his own collection of ephemera.

Memorabilia scrapbook makers perform almost alchemical transformations by taking ephemera, much of it mass-produced, and transforming it into something of personal and lasting value. How does a printed paper item that is publicly available and reproduced in great quantity, become personally meaningful? The answer lies in the processes of selection and arrangement. The individual object becomes part of a mutually contextualizing collection that, as a whole, points back to the identity, interests, and aspirations of the maker. How the items are arranged also significantly shapes the way the audience interacts with and interprets the scrapbook. Investigating the processes of selection and arrangement of collection of ephemera in scrapbooks supports more informed speculation about the private associations and layers of meaning that enliven the ephemera depicted in trompe l’oeil paintings.

Selectivity, the process of deciding what to keep and what to discard, was of primary concern for would-be scrapbook makers, and an especially relevant contemporary issue as it related to taste and discernment. Be it to distinguish between genuine and counterfeit—as alluded to in chapter three—or to judge aesthetic value along with the quality of craftsmanship, discerning tastes were highly valued during the vast shift from agrarian to industrial society and the rise of consumer culture. Being known to have good taste was a mark of superior faculties,

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44 The John F. Peto Studio Museum, which preserves Peto’s house and studio in Island Heights, NJ, contains an incredible amount of paper ephemera that is awaiting cataloguing and study.

45 On the issues of taste as a skill for demonstrating and advancing social status through the long nineteenth century in America, see Joanna Cohen, Luxurious Citizens: The Politics of Consumption in Nineteenth-Century America
often paired with education, which seemed to promise social advancement. \(^{46}\) Skills in
discernment were essential for consumers, as marketplace transactions increasingly became
exchanges between strangers, and the buyer could not rely on his or her personal social
connection to the seller or manufacturer to guarantee quality.

E. W. Gurley, author of an 1880 guide to making scrapbooks, claimed that the activity
would improve the maker’s taste. \(^{47}\) For those not naturally endowed with the powers of
selectivity, he provided a multi-step system. One starts out by Gathering, which he described as a
preliminary examination of every available scrap, setting aside anything pleasing or potentially
useful. Then comes Curing or Seasoning. People need to wait some unspecified length of time to
make sure the things they selected are really going to hold up for the long haul. Only then can
Selection take place. If, on second look, a Gathered object was not so pleasing or useful after all,
or if it too closely duplicated something else in the collection—it should be discarded. \(^{48}\) While
Gurley’s process is surely more elaborate than the actual practices of most scrapbook makers, his
attention to the idea of present and potential utility is useful when looking at actual scrapbooks.
What purpose did the maker imagine this or that item might later fulfill? Pleasure, entertainment,
information, memory?

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\(^{47}\) Because of its reliance on selectivity, scrapbooking was touted as a wholesome educational activity for children and families. Gurley, *Scrap-Books*, 13, 16–18, 24, 55–56. For example, Gurley claimed that families who scrapbooked together “will take an advanced standing in society,” 13.

C. A. Montresor, another nineteenth-century writer on the making of scrapbooks, also emphasized the need to anticipate what objects the maker would be pleased to look at later. In the introduction to her guide to scrapbook making, she compared a slowly made scrapbook—one that included only rare and beautiful things, with a quickly made scrapbook containing that year’s Christmas cards—all indiscriminately pasted in. She described the former as much more valuable in the long haul for the taste and discrimination that went into its making.49

Everything contained in memorabilia scrapbooks was selected because it held some personal meaning for the maker. Some items are overtly personal, like private letters, and other items are less obvious bearers of personal meaning, such as pamphlets or newspaper clippings. Memorabilia scrapbooks’ combination of public, mass-produced objects, with private, individually made objects results in everything becoming personal, as a closer look at Bowen’s scrapbook demonstrates. On the two-page spread consisting of pages 6 and 7 (figure 4.13), we see a variety of objects arranged in rough columns, ranging from a pamphlet from a Kappa Sigma Epsilon debate that lists Clarence as a participant, to a friend’s obituary, a program to the Yale College Fall Regatta, to an letter from his father inviting him to their July 4th celebration.50

49 C. A. Montresor, Some Hobby Horses, 1–4.

50 These two pages contain: In the upper left corner of the verso, we see an envelope with printed in gold. Within the envelope are two pieces of blank lined stationary, with the fraternity’s insignia at the top of each sheet, again, printed in gold. Further down the left edge of the verso, we see a printed program for a debate held by the same fraternity. It is dated Saturday, January 29, 1870, and Bowen is listed as one of the participants. At the bottom left corner is another envelope, this one with two items in it, printed on different paper and using different fonts of typeset: the regulations for college officers dated September 1870, and the Report of the Annual meeting of the Associated Alumni of Yale College from July 21, 1869. Along the right edge of the left-hand page, we encounter an obituary clipped from a newspaper for one of Clarence’s childhood friends, James Bronson Camp, who died of typhoid fever during the winter break of the 1869-1870 academic year. Below this, Clarence pasted one edge of a vertically folded half sheet of paper, which he labeled “a college excuse paper.” It is a printed description of how to write an acceptable excuse paper, n.d. Below this, at the bottom right corner near the spine, is a printed business card for Clarence, with the handwritten date of 1869. On the right-hand page, at the top of the left edge—close to the spine, we encounter printed program for a Competitive Declamation event hosted by Kappa Sigma Epsilon class of ’73 (which is Clarence’s class). It took place on Saturday, February 26, 1870, and Clarence is listed as a participant. Below this, there is an envelope containing an invitation to the Yale Thanksgiving Jubilee, happening on November 16, 1869, with two tickets enclosed. At the bottom of the left edge of the right page, there is a ticket for the class of ‘72’s Junior Promenade Concert, which took place on February 15, 1871. Along the right edge, starting at the top
The Regatta program seems initially to be one of the least personal of these items, a token of an event Clarence attended but in which he did not participate directly (figure 4.14). As a piece of memorabilia, the program represents Bowen’s associations and feelings connected to the experience. Because of its context, I have been able to recover some of its personal added significance. Two pages earlier, there is a hand-written document: a good-behavior pledge that Clarence’s father made him write before going to college, swearing not to do a whole litany of things, including “joining any boat club or attending any regatta” (figure 4.15). The regatta pamphlet then represents Clarence’s youthful rebellion, his independence through disobedience, and his audacity to keep the incriminating evidence. It also clarifies that the audience of this scrapbook likely did not include Clarence’s father.

Indeed, scrapbooks were often felt to be intensely personal, even though they were created from publicly available and even commercially produced contents. Gurley described his own scrapbooks in intimate terms: “the contents of these books, though written by authors unknown to me, and written for the public, are yet such true interpretations of my own feelings, that they show the secret history and aspirations of my soul.”51 While the individual items that comprise a scrapbook may be public, their selection and gathering have the potential to reveal the taste, feelings, and values of the keeper.

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51 Gurley, Scrap-Books, 16.
We see another example of the personalizing power of scrapbooks in Nettie Rosenberry Campbell’s scrapbook. Nettie kept clippings of poetry, humorous stories, and engraved and chromolithographed pictures in her scrapbook, which she made out of a copy of *Polar and Tropical Worlds* by Dr. G. Hartwig (published in 1876). Even though newspapers are public, mass-produced objects with large enough readership to justify their printing, newspaper clippings could have significant personal meaning to the clipping keeper. Nettie gives us some indication of what these clippings meant to her through her hand-written annotations. Around the edge of a romantic tragic poem “Good Bye” by Louis Delcroix, Nettie inscribed, “Never were truer words!” In her scrapbook, we see that other clippings represent relationships as well, with glosses of “Given by a friend” or “Presented by Blanche.” She was even moved to write an original sentimental poem about her own death in the margins by a poem titled “Forgotten” (figure 4.16). With the exception of notices about her wedding and her husband’s funeral, the vast majority of clippings that Nettie saved do not overtly relate to her. This contrasts Clarence Bowen, who mostly kept newspaper clippings that either were about his family or friends or that he authored. There are many ways in which selections from newspapers could be personally symbolic—either directly or indirectly.

In designating ephemeral items as worth keeping, scrapbook makers also changed the function of the item. According to Michael Tompson’s rubbish theory, objects can be categorized as having transient or durable value, or of having no value and thus being rubbish.\(^{53}\)

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\(^{52}\) Nettie Campbell, “Scrapbook,1870s-1881” Mss. Accession (octavo), American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, MA. Nettie is listed as the surviving widow of William Elliot Campbell. She was born Maggie Anette Rosenberry. Both she and her husband were doctors.

Transient value means that an object’s value diminishes with the passing of time until it becomes rubbish. Durable objects increase in value over time. A printed admissions ticket is an excellent example of an object with transient value. It has high exchange value prior to the event, and then no exchange value afterwards. Instead of throwing it away, however, a scrapbook maker might keep the ticket as a souvenir of having attended the event. The ticket has no further exchange value, and it can no longer serve its original function. However, as part of a scrapbook, it has a new function that ensures its durable value, at least in the eyes of the scrapbook maker and owner.

Many of the contents of memorabilia scrapbooks can be interpreted as souvenirs. Souvenirs serve as reminders of unrepeatable experiences. They help the keeper make sense of an experience, shifting it into a more codified and manageable memory. Souvenirs become proof not just of the occurrence of the event but of the keeper’s subjective, narrativized version of the event. Bowen’s regatta program, for example, authenticates Bowen’s presence at the event and what the event meant to him: breaking his father’s rules early in his college experience, rebelliously exerting his independence. By deciding to keep proof of his misbehavior, Bowen selected and strengthened it as part of his vision of himself or who he wanted to be.

Susan Pearce argues that the importance of souvenirs arose in response to the growth of secularization and industrialization during the shift to modern society. Souvenirs help their

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54 On what souvenirs are and how people use them to create meaning, see Susan M. Pearce, “Objects as Meaning: Or Narrating the Past,” in Interpreting Objects and Collections, ed. Susan Pearce, 19–29; Susan M. Pearce, “Collecting Reconsidered,” in Interpreting Objects and Collections, ed. Susan Pearce, 193–204; Susan Stewart, On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection (Durham, NC; London: Duke University Press, 1993), 132–69.

keepers construct an “essential personal and social self centered in its own unique life story.” They shield the concept of the “romantically integrated personal self” from contrary evidence that life is fractured, isolated, or meaningless.57 Pearce’s assessment fits with the rise in scrapbook keeping during the second half of the nineteenth century.

Scrapbooks helped their keepers create a coherent sense of self through gathering souvenirs of the past, but they also helped the maker prepare for an anticipated or desired future. Both Gurley and Montresor cautioned scrapbook makers to be careful to select items that would be interesting or useful to their future selves, but who would those people be? Garvey notes that scrapbook makers were often aspirational in the items they selected: tips on housekeeping for a dreamed of marriage, information about life on the frontier for a hoped-for move.58 Scrapbooks reflected not only who people were currently but also who they thought they would or should become.

Scrapbooking presented a way to organize and keep selected objects; the activity of selecting the materials would surely also train scrapbook makers to look at and interact with pictures and texts in a different, more focused way. If people were looking through newspapers or illustrated periodicals with an eye for what spoke to them, then they would feel justified in skimming and ignoring the rest. This provided a method of coping with the excessive quantities of available materials, and it was also a way for people to shape the world to fit themselves, to confirm their own stories and worldviews.59

56 Pearce, 196.
57 Pearce, 196.
58 Garvey, Writing with Scissors, 3, 50.
59 Garvey found that in Civil War scrapbooks, people selected items that favored their own side. This suggests that today’s "media bubble" concern about social media has deep historic roots. See Garvey, Writing with Scissors, 93–95.
Since they performed such intensely personal functions, it is unsurprising that scrapbooks from this period were typically private, even secret. The maker was often the only intended viewer. The physical form of scrapbooks complements their secretive function and private viewership. Quintessentially book-like, with sturdy covers, scrapbooks are stored in the closed position. When open, they are often rather ungainly—many of the pre-fabricated scrapbook albums are oversized, sometimes over a foot long and wide, and thus need to be placed on a table or lap to read. The small script of newsprint means that the viewer often needs to be physically close to the page. These books support comfortable viewing for one person at a time.

To the owner or to an invited viewer, looking through the scrapbook was an act of intimacy, and it was both visual and tactile. Integral to a scrapbook’s purpose is its preservation of the original material of each item—items, such as trade cards, scaled to the hand and meant to be handled. Their placement in scrapbooks can serve to enhance their tactile appeal. The overlapping or rotation of items and the inclusion of envelopes and folded papers create a variety of enticements to the hand. Engaging with scrapbooks, manipulating the items in scripted ways, the better to see and understand them, lends the items connotations of mystery and discovery.

Scrapbooks were highly valuable to their individual owners. Gurley proclaimed, “I would as soon loan my clock, or my cow, as my scrap-books,” indicating how valuable and integral they were to his everyday life. However, moving beyond the very limited intended audience, or those directly attached to them, memorabilia scrapbooks hold far less appeal. The memories

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60 For an investigation on the intended audience for scrapbooks, see Garvey, 50–51.


62 As Pearce observed, museums typically do not want memorabilia collections unless they are connected to a famous person or they contain very old and rare objects. See Pearce, “Collecting Reconsidered,” 195. Garvey noted that, in the late twentieth century, many libraries and archives changed their collecting protocols to gather more
and dreams that animate the objects are all in the mind of the maker. Knowing something about that maker can unlock depths of meaning, but without that knowledge, the significance is far less accessible.  

Scrapbooks reveal how personal ephemera could be, even mass-produced items like newspaper, pamphlets, or ticket stubs. Collections of carefully selected ephemera aided in forming and consolidating a person’s identity and worldview. This was especially important given the massive influx of printed items in conjunction with the changes modernization brought to many traditional sources of identity like family, work, community, and religion. Through scrapbooking, people sought some modicum of personalization and control of their environment. Rack picture painters like Peto recognized and built upon these established modes of making meaning from ephemera in order to make deeply meaningful artworks that represent unique individuals. While scrapbooks transform publicly available material into something personal and private, rack pictures transformed the materials yet again to make images suitable for public display.

**Rack Pictures: Private Meanings and Public Display**

Where did Dr. Bernard Goldberg hang *Office Board*? Who would have been able to see it, and what would it have meant to them? Perhaps he hung it in his home somewhere, limiting potential viewers to approved house guests. If the painting was on a wall in his office, it would have been on view for family, colleagues, friends, and patients to see and interpret. It is quite possible that the painting, may, at some point, have been displayed even more publicly.

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63 Garvey makes this observation while speculating why more scrapbooks were not preserved once the original owner passed away. See Garvey, *Writing with Scissors*, 216–17.
While we have limited documentation on the exhibition history of rack pictures, we know from our few well-documented examples that at least some were publicly displayed. Peto displayed a work called *Letter Rack* at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in 1880. He also submitted a rack picture to the World’s Fair in Boston in 1883 and another to the New Orleans World’s Fair in 1886. He displayed a rack picture containing a copy of *The Philadelphia Record* at a Jacob Reed’s Sons, Merchant Tailors and Clothiers in Philadelphia sometime after 1883 when the store opened on Chestnut Street. Harnett’s *The Artist’s Letter Rack* was included in his memorial exhibition held at Earle’s Galleries in Philadelphia in 1892.

Even display in a home or office offered far greater public accessibility than scrapbooks. Like the letter racks that they depict—rack pictures are necessarily more performative, more presentational. If a scrapbook is like a diary, then a rack picture is more like an authorized biography, and more akin to traditional portraiture in this way. Rack pictures evoke specific persons for broader audiences, so they must be careful of the line between public and private.

I posit that rack pictures encoded meaning in such a way as to reveal different levels of significance to different audiences. To those for whom “Dr. Goldberg” was just a name, close scrutiny might suggest a vague idea of the young doctor. His photograph shows him to be

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64 “Last Week of the Art Exhibition,” newspaper clipping in “John Frederick Peto and Peto Family Papers, circa 1850-1983,” series 3, box 1, folder 16, item 2, Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C.

65 For the Boston painting, see “Premium Picture” newspaper clipping in “John Frederick Peto and Peto Family Papers, circa 1850-1983” series 3, box 1, folder 16, item 6. For the New Orleans painting exhibition, see unidentified newspaper clipping in the same collection, series 3, box 1, folder 16, item 8. This clipping mentions that the painting was intended for the recent World’s Exposition. See also L. Placide Canonge “Boutade de Peintre,” *L’Abeille de la Nouvelle-Orléans*, May 30, 1886.

66 “Realism in Art” newspaper clipping in “John Frederick Peto and Peto Family Papers, circa 1850-1983” series 3, box 1, folder 16, item 4. I date the clipping to post 1883 based on the listed address for Jacob Reed’s Sons. For more information on this store, see digitized pamphlet from 1924, Jacob Reed’s Sons, *Jacob Reed’s Sons, Founded 1824*, 1924, https://philadelphiastudies.files.wordpress.com/2016/12/jacobreed.pdf

67 For the catalogue for the memorial exhibition, see “Blemly Scrapbook,” 5-8.
pleasant looking and professional, judging by his neat attire and serious expression softened by smile lines. His letters and postal card might indicate that he was man of active correspondence. Whether the viewers understood the mail to be personal or professional depended on if they knew that that 1208 Chestnut Street was the doctor’s office address. The printed pink bulletin is some kind of periodical; the gothic script might imply serious content, perhaps a trade journal. The picture in the scrapbook shows him to be a man interested in nature. The newspaper clippings in the scrapbook and pasted onto the board are harder to interpret—they could be any sort of printed matter. They prove only that Goldberg was a reader who wanted to retain found pieces of information for future use. Only the scrap pasted to the right side gives any indication of its content. Even though the individual words are illegible, the four-line pattern suggests that it is a poem or a song (figure 4.17). The depiction of an illegible clipping of poetry or music would communicate to unknown viewers that Dr. Goldberg had felt moved by such things at some point in time, without giving away the ‘secret history and aspirations of the collector’s soul,’ to paraphrase Gurley.68

Selective illegibility in the depiction of ephemera in rack paintings served to safeguard the subject’s secrets. Peto used blurred words, omissions, and overlapping to delimit what information was available to all viewers. These absences not only help regulate the paintings’ interpretability, they also make the paintings more generalizable. They provide an opening for those excluded from the private meanings to fill in the blanks with their own memories and associations.69

68 Gurley, Scrap-Books, 16.

The clarity of the painting’s meaning would correspond to the viewer’s own relationship to Dr. Goldberg. For people who knew him in his public and professional capacity, the painting would reflect a corresponding level of insight into his character. Such viewers would surely know approximately what we can now piece together from the public record: that 1208 Chestnut was the address of his office, that he had a large extended family, that he was married and had a young child (if the child survived), and that he trained at and remained actively involved with the Medico-Chirurgical College of Philadelphia. This basic information shapes and sharpens the probable meaning of the objects. The correspondence is surely business related, either patients, colleagues, or medical suppliers. Since at least a few of his brothers were also doctors, it is possible that some of the letters were both professional and familial.\(^7\) The pink bulletin perhaps relates to his alma matter or to a medical conference. We know he published a book of gathered prescriptions the year after this was painted. Is it possible he kept his collection of prescriptions in a scrapbook? With our knowledge of Dr. Goldberg limited to what is publicly available, we still cannot know the deeper meaning of the picture of Trenton High Falls or the reference to the poem. The senders of the letters would know precisely their contents; possibly they conveyed shared excitement about some new surgical technique. Perhaps his closer relations could tell us of Dr. Goldberg’s love of hiking or waterfalls, or of a trip he took to Trenton High Falls with his bride. If we take Office Board to be a commission and presume that Goldberg himself was involved in selecting the items featured in the letter rack, then the fullest meaning would have been available only to him and to those with whom he chose to share it.

Peto painted Office Board somewhat unevenly. Some of the objects like the cabinet card photograph and the pink bulletin are detailed and modeled so that they have a fairly convincing

\(^7\) “Thousands Would Gladly Testify,” 9.
trompe l’oeil effect. Other areas are more thinly or provisionally painted. The backboards are so thinly painted that the canvas weave is clearly visible. All in all, it is not one of Peto’s most successful trompe l’oeil paintings, but it is still a very tactilely appealing painting. With the backboard painted to appear flush with the canvas, the objects project towards the viewers, inviting them to reach out and take hold of the loosely affixed items.

The potential to manipulate the objects seems to offer a way to better understand their meaning. If viewers could remove the letters poking out from their envelopes so invitingly, perhaps they could read the concealed content. All of the blurred printed text on the covers of the pamphlets and in the newspaper clippings might just be legible if the viewer could bring it closer. Moving the scrapbook aside would reveal the name of the red-covered magazine.

While certainly many have given in to the temptation to touch rack paintings, they cannot discover the obscured contents of each item through this sense, though this will, of course, confirm the semi-open secret of trompe l’oeil—that it is just a painting. The disjunction between visual and tactile information enhances fascination and yet curtails full knowledge. Peto cleverly implied further depth of meaning, hinting at secrets that might be revealed, without compromising the privacy of the subject. Part of the wonder of these paintings is that they so self-consciously control their own interpretability. The true illusion of the painting is that it seems to offer sensitive, personal information about Dr. Goldberg. Viewers tempted to pry would be quickly disillusioned as they encounter illegible text and frustrating omissions, guarding Dr. Goldberg’s private life.

**Manhood, Separate Spheres, and Secrecy**

For men in late nineteenth-century America, the distinction between public and private life was an important factor in defining what it meant to be masculine. Over the longer period of
industrialization and urbanization, as work increasingly took place outside of the home, realms of experience became more ideologically gendered. Particularly with middle- and upper-class people, private domesticity took on feminine connotations and public and civic experience was associated with men. These separate spheres shaped many people’s perceptions about what kinds of qualities and tasks were appropriate for each gender. Women were to be the emotional, spiritual, and moral center of the family. Men were to go out into the world to earn a living through their intellectual abilities to protect the women and children from the harsh world of business. As home and church were part of the female domain, many men felt that they needed other places for relaxation, recreation, and rejuvenation. Billiard halls and saloons, sports clubs and secret societies rose up to meet those needs.71

At the same time, as Michael Krimmel explains, white men felt that their opportunities to live a properly masculine life were under threat after the end of the Civil War. As more formerly enslaved black men, immigrants, and women competed with white men for employment, these men again sought ways to shore up their own gendered identity through exclusion of others. This added to the allure of exclusive clubs and secret societies.72


72 Kimmel, Manhood in America, 59–136.
Mark Carnes estimates that at least one in five American men were part of a fraternal group between 1865 and 1900. Groups like the Masons provided a separate space from the cares and pressures of both home and work, and there men could give expression to their spiritual and emotional selves. Membership in such exclusive clubs or societies also conferred social status and cemented social and business connections. This is especially pertinent because we know that John Peto was a Mason, as were many of his patrons.

Masons use heavily symbolic rituals with coded meanings, as well as levels of initiation, to structure an exclusive, hierarchical, and selectively permeable society. Carnes explains that with each level of initiation, new layers of meaning for symbolic content became accessible. Lower level members were given trivial explanations that sometimes directly conflicted with the interpretations they would be given at higher levels. Members learned that surface meanings often obscured deeper meanings. Members at all levels understood the secretive nature of their rituals and symbols, and they carefully guarded their knowledge from lower level members and non-members. Members’ wives and families certainly knew there was something secret going on. Their frustration at being kept in the dark enhanced members’ sense of power in controlling the distribution of knowledge.

Peto’s rack pictures evince similar structures of selectively penetrable mysteries. Like redacted documents, these pictures almost flaunt the fact that they have secret content. The overlapping objects that obscure words, the use of envelopes, the blurring of content, these all

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75 Bolger uncovered Masonic connections for Peto and many of his patrons. See Bolger, “Early Rack Paintings,” 59-81; on the details of Peto’s involvement, see 79, note 39.

76 Carnes, *Secret Ritual*, 35, 63, 80–89.
announce that there is information being intentionally kept from the ignorant viewer. The paintings reinforce the power of those in the know.

Peto joined the Masons in 1881. Dr. Goldberg, though he did not join until 1889, was surely already steeped in the American cultural expectations that guided public and private life for men. Peto’s Office Board for Christian Faser, (fig. 4.11), painted in 1881, shows an even more extreme level of privacy and secrecy. Perhaps Peto as a new initiate was more fastidious in these issues than he would be by the time he painted Office Board for Dr. Goldberg.

Christian Faser (1844-1923) joined the Masons in 1869. He owned an art gallery in Philadelphia, and worked as a painting restorer, frame dealer, and cabinetmaker. His letter rack contains an almanac, a few envelopes—one with a letter sticking out, a postal card, two greeting cards, a trade card, a carte de visite photograph, and the dangling corners of a torn away card or label. The address on the yellow letter matches that of the business logo on the white envelope, and the few visible digits on the postal card: 824 Arch St., Philadelphia. Because there are no other addresses—of either senders or recipients—on any of these items, we have no indication that they would be anything other than business correspondence.

The postal card, in particular, underscores the public quality of the painting (figure 4.18). Postcards of course lack the envelope of privacy. The postcard in the painting, just like the one in Office Board, is government issued. The U.S. government began making postcards in 1873, and they were one cent to send (figure 4.19). This was half the price of privately produced postcards,

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78 On Dr. Goldberg’s connection to the Masons, see Bolger, "Early Rack Paintings," 81, note 56.

79 For more biographical information Faser, see Bolger, "Early Rack Paintings," 67–68.
which had been commercially available since 1861. They had space for the address on one side and a note on the other. These postal cards were not about beautiful pictures or exotic locales; they were simply quick, cheap forms of communication that anyone might see.

The *Public Ledger Almanac* of 1881, prevalently featured in the upper left corner, also contributes to the painting’s public persona theme (figure 4.20). The *Public Ledger*, a local Philadelphia newspaper, annually distributed its almanac free to subscribers (figure 4.21). The Public Ledger building was located at 6th and Chestnut, just a short walk from Faser’s business address, giving a strong local character to the painting. George W. Childs, the publisher, described the almanac as “a home book of reference and a treasury of useful information on local and general subjects and events.” It contains calendars; an Ephemeris—or a calendar including astronomical and tidal information; census data; trivia; information on local, state, and federal government officials; daily news highlights from the previous year; a list of local deaths in the prior year; addresses of local religious services organized by religion and denomination; postage rates; and household tips. Such information aimed to help readers locate themselves in time and place, to be individually useful to a large number of individuals. It is a compendium of public information designed for personal use.

One of the most striking items in the painting is the carte-de-visite photograph, presumably of Faser, turned upside down and half concealed by the yellow envelope (figure 4.22). Cartes-de-visite are formal portrait photographs, made by studio photographers, that aim to represent the sitter in a timeless rather than context-specific way, with minimal or obviously

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80 Smithsonian Institute, “Postcard History,” Smithsonian Institution Archives, September 19, 2013, https://siarchives.si.edu/history/featured-topics/postcard/postcard-history.


82 *Public Ledger Almanac*, i.
artificial background. Such cool, composed images give little away of the sitter’s individual character, but this could hardly matter to someone who knew the sitter, for whom the picture is not just a representation of likeness but also a symbol of the person and their relationship. Peto takes the form to a new impersonal extreme by hiding half the face. Bolger reasonably argues that this was a strategy on Peto’s part to minimize the need for re-working the painting should Faser not make the purchase. Be that as it may, the half-visible face is also an appropriate metaphor for the concealed lives of nineteenth-century businessmen.

While these hindrances to visibility impede viewers’ ability to pry into Faser’s private life, the painting may still of course have signified in personal, private ways to Faser and his close circle. As the golden envelope on the lower left says, there is “Important Information Inside,” but it is very selectively accessible. If some of the ephemera came from Faser’s own collection, surely a hint of an item would recall the whole, with all its accrued meanings. The envelope with the seal is surely an example of Faser’s business stationary (figure 4.23). However, many of the other items appear to be models selected from Peto’s own collection, modified and arranged to convey a sense of personalness and hidden depths. Peto carefully calibrated his rack pictures such as *Office Board* and *Office Board for Christian Faser* to present an appropriate public persona for his subjects using contents that suggest that more personal and private levels exist. Peto’s aptitude for discretion comes into sharp relief when compared to William Harnett’s second and final rack picture.

In Harnett’s *Mr. Hulings’ Rack Picture* of 1888, we see a simplified letter rack made of pink tape tacked to a surface of dark green wooden boards. Letters, postal cards, and calling

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83 For more on cartes de visite, see note 134 in chapter 2, p. 110

84 Bolger, “Early Rack Paintings,” 68.
cards have been tucked into the letter rack. Unlike in Peto’s rack picture, we can see the names and addresses of the men who sent the letters and left the calling cards. Doreen Bolger’s diligent research has revealed that the names on the letters and business cards are men that Hulings knew from his church, his Mason lodge, and potentially his military service during the Civil War. It would make more sense for these letters from personal connections to be addressed to Hulings’ home rather than business address. Here, however, Harnett seems to have attempted to make the painting appropriate for public viewing by having the letters addressed to the business address. Contemporary viewers of the painting who did not know Hulings personally but perhaps patronized his store would likely assume the correspondence was for business, while Hulings himself and his close friends would know better.

Harnett was clearly attempting to create a painting that would work on multiple levels for different audiences, relying on coded information that only privileged insiders could read. However, this effect was not fully successful. The painting depicts a card clearly labeled “Mary Commandery,” the name of Hulings’ Mason lodge (figure 4.24). This inclusion of legible information regarding a secret society seems to have made the painting ultimately incompatible with public viewing, undermining the deception of masking personal correspondence as business. The painting was omitted from Harnett’s memorial exhibition, which brought together many of his other works. Hulings owned more than one Harnett painting, and his name appears on the list of contributors to the memorial exhibition. It must have been a conscious

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85 See Bolger, “Cards and Letters,” 4-32.
86 Bolger, 22.
87 Bolger, 23.
decision, therefore, to selectively loan his paintings. Hulings must have felt that displaying his rack picture was too great a risk.  

Harnett was not, as far as we know, part of any exclusive clubs or secret societies. As a Catholic, he certainly could not have been part of the Masons. Perhaps Peto, as a Mason, was more attuned to the stakes of male privacy. At any rate, Peto certainly went much farther to withhold any information that might be too personal from his rack pictures.

**From Letter Rack to Rack Picture**

The effectiveness of rack pictures relies in great part on viewers’ familiarity with ephemera. The detailed and at-times highly illusionistic painted representations of these objects, however, are not the objects themselves. Whether immediately or eventually, viewers encountering the rack paintings will recognize them as paintings. The shift in medium, from print and photography to paint, is essential to the meaning of rack pictures.

Souvenirs or mementos authenticate peoples’ experiences by providing a metonymic, trace-like link to a meaningful event. What about paintings of such objects? A convincing trompe l’oeil effect may initially make viewers uncertain about whether or not they are seeing the real objects. However, when that illusion inevitably fully breaks, the viewer will understand they are looking at a painting. As we saw in chapter 2, people historically thought of these kinds of paintings as imitative and not creative. Viewers seemingly had no doubt that the paintings were faithful copies of real objects. However, even a trompe l’oeil painting, so often compared to photography, does not convey the same reliability as a photograph, which itself has an indexical relationship with its subject.

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89 Bolger, “Cards and Letters,” 23.

As we have seen, these artists did make adjustments to their subject matter, such as selectively blurring words and changing or omitting details in order to protect their patrons’ privacy. By making a painted version (even a censored one) of the newspaper clipping or envelope, the painting refers to the real object presumably in the collection of the painting’s subject. What authority the painting has derives from the existence of the external referent, and as such it underscores the value of the original souvenir. By making a copy of the envelope, the artist recognized it as something of value—if only of personal value to the owner. By creating a painting of the ephemeral objects, the artist elevated the personal mementos into a medium that would translate that personal value into cultural value.

The paintings also make the ephemeral permanent, and they do so in two ways. As I discussed in chapter three, Harnett’s, Peto’s, and Haberle’s painted representations of paper-based media emphasized the ephemerality of those forms both physically and in terms of content. Their paintings challenged viewers to consider the relative durability of the painting compared to the subject matter. On the other hand, the painted representations also acted as enduring records of the paper-based ephemera. In so doing, the paintings designated the ephemeral souvenirs as items worth preserving because of their personal significance to the owner.

Rack paintings also stabilize the more fluid form of the letter rack. With a real letter rack, the items caught up in the ribbons could be easily removed or replaced. The arrangement is temporary, evolving as the priorities of the owner change. A painted rack picture renders each element immovable, firmly stuck in its place like a scrap glued into a scrapbook. Nothing further

91 Mark Jones argues that people faked works of art or artifacts only when the original was highly valuable. This seems to pertain to trompe l’oeil paintings if we think of the illusionistically represented object in the painting as a fake. See Jones, “Why Fakes?” in Interpreting Objects and Collections, 92–97.
can be added or removed, which gives a sense of stability not only to the composition but to the personality it evokes.

“(T)here is no doubt that people like things that have at least the appearance of not having been drilled into line. Life itself has that sort of appearance as it goes on…An instinct of something chaotic, ironic, empiric in the order of experience seems to have been the inspiration of our humorist’s art.”\textsuperscript{92} This quote from William Dean Howells is not about rack paintings, though it would certainly apply. Howells was discussing Mark Twain’s writing style in \textit{The Innocents Abroad} and \textit{Following the Equator}, calling them scrapbook-like. On Twain’s fractured vignettes, Howells wrote, “Any one may compose a scrap-book, and offer it to the public with nothing of Mark Twain’s good-fortune. Everything seems to depend upon the nature of the scraps, after all; his scraps might have been consecutively arranged, in a studied order, and still have immensely pleased…”\textsuperscript{93} In other words, Twain’s high-quality content could have been arranged in a more standard, regimented order and still have been good, but Howells implies that there is greater naturalism, even greater realism in Twain’s non-linear, fractured, and abruptly juxtaposed version of storytelling.

It is certainly worth noting that in literature during this same period, American authors were experimenting with non-linear narrative style. Moreover, Howell’s analysis makes clear the aesthetic parallel between literature and trompe l’oeil painters, who sought, on one level, to approximate the appearance of the world to such an extent to make viewers question their powers of perception. Further, by distinguishing between naturally occurring chaos and the appearance of such, Howells affirms Twain’s authorial control over the material, carefully


\textsuperscript{93} Howells, “Mark Twain: An Inquiry,” 308.
calibrated to appear unintentional. This too, is crucial for a successful trompe l’oeil painting, one in which the subject matter appears incidental and yet holds together as a composition.

Howells’ observations resonate strongly with the nature of modern urban life. Fragmentation and chaos come through in the visuality of the street, with the unruly plastering of billposters, overlapping, obscuring, torn away. The density of population entailed physical proximity and social encounters between strangers in places of commerce, transportation, and entertainment. Cities were—like scrapbooks and rack paintings—places characterized by the simultaneity of transactions and events. Rack paintings registered and resonated with this characteristic sense of jumbled and juxtaposed heterogeneity, but they are ultimately about coping with the seeming chaos of modern life rather than being subsumed by it. The paintings call upon viewers to find meaning in juxtapositions and to understand fragments as constituent parts of a new cohesive whole, but they seem to acknowledge that this is not an easy task. The tensions between order and chaos are embodied in the contrast between the taut ribbons and the objects they contain.

The letter rack as an aesthetic device seems to echo the dimensions of the picture plane, giving a definite structure to the painting. We can see the similarity to the grids in maps—organic topography divided into a systematic division of space by an overlay of longitude and latitude lines. With the letter rack, the gridded geometric structure contrasts the casual, irregular placement of the ephemeral items. However, the letter rack ribbons are not an overlay but an integral part of the composition.

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The rack also strongly recalls the use of a grid as a tool for artists to better see and represent their subject matter. In Albrecht Dürer’s *Draughtsman Making a Perspective Drawing a Reclining Woman*, we see the artist looking through a gridded plane at his subject matter and recording his observations on a gridded sheet in front of him (figure 4.26). The difficult work of drawing a foreshortened subject is made easier. The artist does not need to draw the woman, he just needs to draw what he sees in each segmented square. Each little square is its own fractured image, a building block of the whole. By imposing this grid, the artist is able to see his subject more accurately and convey what he sees rather than what he thinks a reclining woman looks like. There is a paradoxical tension in the way a grid fractures vision in order to offer a clearer conception of the whole that resonates with letter rack paintings. The letter rack both divides the image and holds it together, fracturing and focusing attention.

I suggest we may think of the letter rack as a kind of net, formally similar to a grid, but with different metaphorical valences. A net is also a tool of containment, keeping the items in place for later use. More saliently, perhaps, a net is a tool of selection, with openings to let unwanted items pass through. Nets are selectively permeable. The net is an externalized version of the collector’s preferences and capacity for discernment. Applying this to letter rack paintings, the rack structure is what holds together the selected objects, just as the patron or collector is the connective tissue between the objects.

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95 The production of much of the ephemeral subject matter itself relies on the construct of the grid as used in the printing process. As a print matrix, the grid serves as the structure for typeset in organizing a page of text, to optimize the use of space on a single plane. This has somewhat limited in applicability to rack paintings, however, because their compositions have extensive overlapping, implying layers and depth rather than one plane. For a deeper look at the relationship between rack pictures and print matrices, see Jennifer L. Roberts, “Wyeth Lecture in American Art: Reversing American Art” (Washington, D.C, National Gallery of Art, November 30, 2013).
While the letter racks in Harnett’s two rack pictures are whole, the vast majority of Peto’s rack pictures feature broken ribbons.\textsuperscript{96} Jack Williamson describes postmodern artists’ use of the broken or altered grid as a sign of irrationality, as a broken promise of clarity and legibility.\textsuperscript{97} The broken ribbons further point to the genuine struggle for control and cohesion. Whether or not Peto intended this meaning or if the historical viewers read it as such, I argue that these paintings embody the tensions between the perceptual fragmentation associated with the modern city and individuals’ attempts to maintain a sense of self that is integrated and whole.

The strong compositional cohesion of Peto’s and Harnett’s rack pictures convey the unified nature of their subjects as individuals. The painters intentionally selected each element to create balanced, engaging, and meaningful pictures. It is their purposeful selection and arrangement that cues viewers—once they have seen through the trompe l’oeil illusion—to see the assortments of ephemera as collections.

As an intentional collection, rather than as an incidental accumulation, the objects are revealing of the collector’s values and interests.\textsuperscript{98} This is especially so for memorabilia collections.\textsuperscript{99} The effects are synergistic. Contextualization within the collection that each object helps to constitute focuses specific valences of meaning, and shades of character.\textsuperscript{100}

\textsuperscript{96} Bolger suggests that the broken ribbons in Peto's rack paintings may have a Masonic symbolic meaning. She explains that Masons disapproved of using perfect symmetry, so perhaps Peto's broken letter racks disrupt symmetry intentionally. See Bolger, “Early Rack Paintings,” 67.

\textsuperscript{97} Williamson, “The Grid,” 24-30.

\textsuperscript{98} On what makes a group of objects a collection, see Susan M. Pearce, “The Urge to Collect,” in Interpreting Objects and Collections, ed. Susan Pearce, 157–59. See also Pearce, “Collecting Reconsidered,” 193-204.

\textsuperscript{99} While Stewart argues that souvenir collections like scrapbooks resist coherence because each object is so laden with nostalgia that they inhibit any collective meaning from coming into focus, Pearce asserts that the larger meaning of a memorabilia collection is the values, hopes, fears, and fascinations of the collectors themselves. See Stewart, On Longing, 152 and Pearce, “Collecting Reconsidered,” 193-204.

\textsuperscript{100} On the dynamic of contextualization in collections, see Pearce, “The Urge to Collect,” 158.
simulating collections of ephemeral souvenirs, these paintings emphasize the agency of the individual patrons to attain some level of control of over their environments and their senses of self. They seem to demonstrate what Walter Benjamin observed about collections: that they are always battling the “chaos of memories.”\textsuperscript{101}

Patrons like Dr. Goldberg, Mr. Faser, and Mr. Hulings, in choosing to purchase letter rack portraits, acquired paintings that were visually, tactically, and psychologically appealing. These paintings draw their viewers in for a closer look to try to discern the blurred words, tempting them to touch and move the objects to get a fuller understanding, appealing to their sense memories of handling similar objects. To those who knew the patron well, the collected objects would bring into focus a rich portrait of the man’s values, interests, and connections. While elevating those with exclusive insight, the paintings also engage other viewers by using subject matter with which all viewers would have some familiarity and associations, inviting them to form their own self-reflective interpretations. The paintings imbued the patrons with authority to make order and meaning from chaotic experiences, and to control the accessibility of their own stories.

Artists like Peto and Harnett recognized the power of ephemera to partially meet rising needs for personalization and self-definition. They created paintings that built upon the language of popular visual culture to deliver sophisticated commentary on the nature of modern life that would resonate with a broad audience. Through their depictions of ephemera, they remediated popular visual culture, took its contemporary use as subject matter, and experimented with forms of meaning-making that pushed the traditional boundaries of painting.

Conclusion

When I have described this project to people outside of art history or the university—one of the things that consistently connects is that I am studying the art that would have been interesting and accessible to middle- and working-class people. Working in the traditional medium of oil painting, using traditional painting techniques, and fitting into a historically established style, late nineteenth-century American trompe l’oeil painters redefined painting for a broader audience of fine art viewers by using the language of popular visual media. These paintings were imaginative and sophisticated responses to pressing issues of modernization. Innovations and expansions in popular visual technologies stemmed from and mediated modernization. Harnett, Haberle, and Peto, among others, recognized the attractions and drawbacks of the increasing abundance of printed and photographic items. They saw how people engaged with these accessible forms, treasuring some, discarding or ignoring others, shaping their environments and strengthening their self-concepts. Through their frequent depictions of the reproductive arts, these paintings staged advantageous comparisons among media to maintain the elevated status of painting at the apex of the new visual ecology. Their paintings are a testament not only to their ingenuity, but also to the shifting power structures of the art world.

To understand why Harnett, Haberle, and Peto painted representations of prints and photographs, I examined media as subject matter, contextualized within the image ecology. This approach opens up many new avenues for research. The iconology of prints and photographs in paintings could be much more deeply understood by looking outside of just late nineteenth-century American trompe l’oeil paintings. There are many genre scenes—both street scenes and interiors—that may be fruitful to examine through this lens. What changes in paper, print, and/or photography may have impacted this iconography at different times, in different places? To what extent does the style of painting correlate to the treatment of the subject matter?
To broaden the project further, we may consider the invention of film, of moving pictures, that began to be developed in the late nineteenth century. How was film represented in other media and vice versa? How did this very new medium impact all the pre-existing ones? The absorption, the reality effect, the pace of movement and the illusions of speed? Was film, like photography, understood as a way to externalized memory? What about the differences in how viewers experience film, in groups most often, and in darkened theaters? How did the viewing context shape viewer expectations and interpretations of the content, and how did that, in turn, affect their understanding of other, older visual media? How, in short, did this impact the media ecology? And how did this change as the medium rapidly evolved over the first few decades of the 20th century?

This innovative approach of studying media as subject matter has applicability far beyond the scope of this dissertation. How different would the history of American art or nineteenth century art look if encounters with changing visual technologies was taken as a major theme? What currently marginal or unknown artists would shift into focus? What would we stand to learn about how people lived in their visual environments?

My research only begins to explore the complexity of painting’s position in the evolving image ecology of the late nineteenth century. Every medium is defined in part by its relationships with other media. Whether painters purposely denied or engaged with the changes in the visual culture, painting’s cultural status was necessarily altered. Seeking to better understand the relationships among multiple visual media in any historical context presents highly fertile new territory for art history, visual culture studies, and media studies.

I posited that part of these paintings’ appeal to viewers was the invitation to slow down, to look closely and carefully, to contemplate. I argued that slower processing was a positive
value, a reaction against the ever-increasing pace of modern life, especially in urban visual environments. This can be understood in the language of ‘anti-modernism,’ a phrase that is both effective and misleading, because how are responses to modernization—however diverse—not also part of the modern? I wonder if the skill of slow, sustained, focused looking was rewarded by modern life—was it adaptive to the changing culture? Or was it simply reactionary, demonstrating the human need for a rest? It seems unlikely to me that this slow looking, which I began thinking about through reading the literature on Tonalism, is limited to one style of painting or even to painting as a medium. I wonder, is this a type of looking was only promoted by older, more traditional media? It may be worth exploring sculpture, a very slow medium in terms of making, to think about what kind of viewer engagement it encourages and how that may have changed—or changed in significance—during the period of modernization.

One of the limitations of this study is that it has focused mostly on men. The paintings I studied were made by men, often, seemingly, for other men, and with what would have been understood as masculine subject matter. What about women? How did historical women who viewed these paintings engage with them? Were their experiences of these paintings, and of the whole image ecology, impacted by their culturally constrained positions as women? That both men and women participated heartily in scrapbook making surely warrants careful consideration of the extent to which women, as a demographic group, participated in popular and more elite realms of visual culture. Did women’s magazines, or other female-targeting publications, promote a different view of paper, art, or visual culture in general? One relatively simple way to expand this project would be to research paintings by Claude Raguet Hirst, who was the most well-known, and possibly only, female trompe l’oeil painter during this era.
This raises larger questions about how responses to urbanization, industrialization, and consumerism differed person to person. Was the pace of life or the shifting media ecology experienced differently depending on gender, social class, ethnicity, age, type of work, or location? Certainly, nineteenth-century American culture promoted differentiated experiences of home, labor, leisure, and the division public and private space. What other styles of painting or other visual forms can we investigate to find the answers, bearing in mind that accessibility delimits reception?

By taking into consideration multiple ways of engaging with modernization, by uncovering more diverse viewpoints or by focusing on different media, or the combination of both, we stand to gain a much richer understanding of the era and the uneven process of modernization.
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Figure 4.14: Detail of figure 4.13, Regatta program.
Figure 4.15: Good behavior pledge, from Bowen Scrapbook, vol II.
For a long time we sat under the syringas, in a half-closed state of consciousness. Nettie seemed disposed to interrupt. Silence that neither seemed to desire, to keep her from her lap; one of her hands was clasped in mine, the other caressed my brow and hair. But her eyes looked up and onward, as if her thoughts were not of the present, but far away toward the unseen future. The silence oppressed me, and her absence chilled me. I spoke.

"Genie, do you want to see me?" she asked softly.

"Say that you love me; that you will be mine—my wife, when I have won wealth and fame to lay at your feet!" I cried, passionately, as I clasped my arms about her.

For an instant she suffered me to hold her thus, and then quietly disengaged herself, she answered me:

"Walter, you and I are both too young to talk of marriage yet. You are but twenty, and I three years younger. At these ages men and women scarcely know themselves; what they imagine to be love one day is lost in a new fancy the next. We part to-morrow, not to meet again for three years; in that time, Walter, we shall both very probably forget this childish affair, and wonder we ever called it love. At all events, it would be foolish and wrong for us to bind ourselves by an engagement which would in all probability fail and tret us a year or two, and at last be broken. But if, when we meet again, we are the same as now, perhaps—but it is useless to talk of such uncertainties; time will show."

I sat like one in a dream. This calm, cold, worldly reasoning fell like ice upon my fiery heart.

How could she talk of change in such a matter-of-fact way? I would have staked my life on my fidelity; but for her I had doubts; and perhaps she had never loved me; but had only been trifling with me. I started up in despair at the thought, and walked moiderily away from the spot, folded arms, and gloomy thoughts that tumbled out, with a weary hopelessness to the world to come—

The soft rustle of a woman's garments was the only thing I remembered.
Figure 4.17: Detail of figure 4.2, newspaper scrap
Figure 4.18: Detail of figure 4.11, Faser’s postal card

Figure 4.19: US Postal Card, 1882.
Figure 4.20: Detail of figure 4.11, Public Ledger Almanac.
Figure 4.21: Public Ledger Almanac, 1881.
Figure 4.22: Detail of figure 4.11, carte de visite.

Figure 4.23: Detail of figure 4.11, envelope with business seal.
Figure 4.24: Detail of figure 3.8, Mary Commandery.
Figure 4.25: Detail of figure 3.8, newspaper scrap.

Figure 4.26: Albrecht Dürer’s *Draughtsman Making a Perspective Drawing a Reclining Woman*, ca. 1600. Woodcut, 3 1/6 x 8 7/16 in. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Accession number 17.37.314.