

SIXTH STREET AT CONSTITUTION AVENUE NW WASHINGTON DC 20565 • 737-4215 extension 224

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART INTRODUCES FIRST MAJOR EXHIBITION
OF AMERICAN TROMPE L'OEIL STILL-LIFE PAINTING

The first major exhibition of American trompe l'oeil ("fool-the-eye") still-life painting opens today (Saturday, March 21) at the National Gallery of Art with 100 examples in or related to this entertaining visual style by twenty-eight artists, making this the largest survey of nineteenth-century American still life to date.

The exhibition, entitled The Reality of Appearance: The Trompe l'Oeil Tradition in American Painting, has been organized by the University Art Museum, Berkeley, California. It will remain on view at the National Gallery through May 3rd.

The selections were made from public and private collections by Alfred V. Frankenstein, art critic of the San Francisco Chronicle and preeminent authority on American trompe l'oeil painting.

The exhibition centers around the work of four outstanding nineteenth-century artists, Raphaelle Peale (1774-1825), William Michael Harnett (1848-1892), John Frederick Peto (1854-1907), and John Haberle (1856-1933).

Harnett, who is widely acknowledged as the central figure in American still-life painting, is represented by thirty-four pictures.

Peale, one of the earliest artists in the exhibition, is called by Mr. Frankenstein "the first really distinguished still-life

(MORE)

specialist to emerge in this country." Six examples of his work will be shown, one of which conveys his facility with total trompe l'oeil.

Peto, the third dominant figure, is also well represented by fifteen examples, more than half of which have not been seen publicly before. A failure in his time because he delighted too much in the commonplace, but highly appreciated today, he is considered the master of the rack picture, a pictorial convention unique to trompe l'oeil in which objects of little depth, such as letters, newspapers, labels, and photographs, are shown tucked under ribbons stretched across and tacked to a board.

In contrast to Peto's work is the flamboyant, almost comic, style of Haberle, the last of the four main figures. Night, a recently discovered example of Haberle's work, which is described by Mr. Frankenstein as "probably the greatest trompe l'oeil painting ever produced in America," is also being shown publicly for the first time.

The effect of trompe l'oeil representation depends on the degree to which the artist successfully deceives the viewer into accepting illusion for reality. The artist's devices consist in choosing objects, or situations, involving as little depth as possible, arresting motion, and maintaining normal scale. Outstanding examples in the present exhibition include Harnett's long-lost Letter Rack, painted in 1888 for George Hulings, a Philadelphia dry-goods merchant and friend of the artist; Raphaelle Peale's rack picture called A Deception; Haberle's Slate, showing a child's school tablet with a cryptic message and the chalk hanging by a string in front; Alexander Pope's recreation of a crate covered with chicken wire and holding four puppies, entitled Do Not Feed; and Jefferson David Chalfant's

(MORE)

Which is Which?, that asks the viewer to guess which of two United States postage stamps is real and which is painted. Ironically, in the over-eighty years since the picture was made, the real stamp has faded while the painted one is still clear and strong.

A fully-illustrated catalogue, with eight color plates and an introduction and notes by Mr. Frankenstein, is available for \$3.50.

The Reality of Appearance, following its closing at the National Gallery on May 3rd, will be seen also at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (May 19th - July 5th), the University Art Museum, Berkeley, and the California Palace of the Legion of Honor, San Francisco (July 15th - August 31st), and the Detroit Institute of Arts (September 15th - October 31st).

Editors Note:

On May 3rd, Mr. Frankenstein, who is also Curator of American Art, University Art Museum, Berkeley, and Lecturer in American Art at the University of California, will give a lecture in the auditorium of the National Gallery at 4 p.m. The title of his lecture is Appearance and Reality; or Sleuthing among Still Lifes.

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