

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

NEWS RELEASE

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NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ACQUIRES

NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN MASTERPIECE

Washington, D.C. -- A celebrated masterpiece by the American artist William M. Harnett (1848-1892) has been acquired by the National Gallery of Art, director Earl A. Powell III announced today. The Old Violin, a tour de force of trompe-l'oeil realism, created a sensation when it was first exhibited in 1886 and became Harnett's most famous painting. Along with other Harnett pictures that convincingly fooled the eye, the painting inspired contemporary debate about the aesthetic and moral issues of imitation and deception.

The Old Violin is the gift of Mr. and Mrs. Richard Mellon Scaife in honor of Paul Mellon. It has been traveling as part of the William M. Harnett exhibition, which will open at the National Gallery on March 14 and continue through June 13, 1993, the final stop on its cross-country tour.

"We are enormously grateful to Mr. and Mrs. Scaife for this major gift and superb addition to our American collection," said Powell. "In its eloquent and expressive beauty The Old Violin is perhaps unsurpassed in all of American still-life painting. Its subtlety of observation and harmony of composition reveal the artist at the peak of his technical and imaginative powers."

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Painted in 1886 at the height of Harnett's career, The Old Violin masterfully depicts, in actual size, a violin hanging on a simple wooden door, with every nuance of the instrument's time-worn surface lovingly portrayed. A few other objects -- a curling sheet of music, a postmarked envelope, a newspaper clipping, and a bow -- surround the violin, all framed by the large rusted hinges of the door.

When first exhibited at the Thirteenth Cincinnati Industrial Exposition in 1886, viewers were enthralled by the painting's technical virtuosity. "A policeman stands by it constantly," reported a contemporary newspaper, "lest people reach over and attempt to see if the newspaper clipping is genuine by tearing it off." Visitors praised the violin's "perfect finish, matchless color and absolute correctness of detail," the door's "marvelous" iron hinges, and the "miracle" of the press clipping.

The following year, the painting was displayed at the Second Minneapolis Industrial Exposition, where it was admired by President and Mrs. Grover Cleveland. Although Harnett's paintings were regularly exhibited in leading institutions such as the National Academy of Design, they also were often shown in other settings such as shop windows, hotel lobbies, department stores, industrial expositions, and saloons, thus reaching a wide popular audience.

Born in Ireland, Harnett immigrated to Philadelphia as a child. At age eighteen, while working as a silver engraver, he

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began studying art in Philadelphia and later in New York. When his paintings began to sell in 1875, Harnett was able to move, as he put it, "wholly into painting." By 1880 he had saved enough money to travel, study, and paint in Europe. The artist produced The Old Violin shortly after returning to New York after six years abroad. He lived just six years longer, dying in 1892 at the age of forty-four.

The National Gallery also owns a smaller Harnett table top still life, My Gems (1888), included in the exhibition, and a work clearly influenced by him, The Old Violin (c. 1890), by his friend and follower, John Frederick Peto. The Peto painting is on view in Gallery 65 of the West Building.

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National Gallery of Art

Washington, D.C.

WILLIAM M. HARNETT

Backgrounder

When William M. Harnett died in 1892, few primary records remained to document his brief life of forty-four years. Four decades later, the sleuth-like investigations of Edith Halpert, a New York gallery owner, and Alfred Frankenstein, a journalist for the San Francisco Chronicle, had pieced together the art and career of this enigmatic painter.

Born in County Cork, Ireland, in 1848, Harnett was brought to Philadelphia as an infant. He left Catholic school to help support his mother and sisters. At age seventeen he became apprenticed to an engraver, and one year later he enrolled in an evening drawing class at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, the start of his formal art training that would continue over the next dozen years.

Moving to New York in 1869, Harnett was employed by several large jewelry and silver manufacturers, including Tiffany and Company, where he engraved monograms on flatware. Harnett's tight, linear painting style has been linked to his early experience as a silver engraver.

While working as an engraver, Harnett took evening classes at the National Academy of Design and later at the Cooper Institute, a free school that provided art and science education to working-class people. In 1874, eight years after he had

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started academic study, Harnett painted his first known still life, Paint Tube and Grapes. By 1875 he had sold enough pictures to enable him to move, as he put it, "wholly into painting."

While Harnett's early compositions featured fruit as subjects, he quickly turned away from this mid nineteenth-century still-life tradition to focus on everyday objects such as mugs, pipes, stationery, musical instruments, and later dead game. He developed a deceptively realistic technique of crisply delineated contours, convincingly simulated textures, and highlights built up with impasto.

Moving back to Philadelphia in 1876, Harnett reentered a revitalized Pennsylvania Academy. There he studied with Thomas Eakins and became friendly with other art students, including the still-life painter John Frederick Peto. Harnett's work was regularly accepted for important annual exhibitions at the National Academy of Design and the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.

By 1880 he had saved enough money to travel to Europe, where he studied and exhibited for the next six years. Starting out in London, the artist continued to Frankfurt and settled in Munich, a major European art center.

Here his canvases became more crowded and the settings more elaborate, reflecting the influence of European still lifes. New elements such as armor, draperies, and ornate carpets were introduced. Harnett began painting large-scale game pictures,

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notably After the Hunt (1883). He produced four versions of this still life; the last was exhibited at the Paris Salon in 1885. While in Europe, he also started to collect the bric-a-brac used later as props in his still lifes.

Harnett returned to New York in 1886. At the height of his career in 1888, the artist was discovered to have kidney disease. Hospitalized that winter, he died four years later.

Harnett painted 250 known pictures during the course of his seventeen-year career. Because of his chronic illness, he completed just ten works during his last four years. In these late still lifes, motifs from his early work reappeared: the mug, pipe, card rack, and violin. These objects continued to demonstrate Harnett's dazzling technical command of the trompe-l'oeil technique, as in Old Models (1892), his last painting, intended for display at the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition of 1893. At the same time, the works are imbued with a new, more evocative dimension, a sense of nostalgia expressing both a longing for the past in an era of dynamic change as well as a wistful reflection on Harnett's own life.

Harnett's paintings commanded substantial prices. Despite hard work, however, he received little encouragement from his artistic peers and never achieved great financial success, living very modestly throughout his life.

When Harnett died, the New York Times hailed him as "one of the best known still-life painters in the country." He was

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honored with a memorial exhibition at Earle's Galleries in Philadelphia. Within a decade, however, the artist was forgotten, as collectors turned to new European styles, especially impressionism.

The reappearance of his Faithful Colt (1890) on the art market in 1935 sparked renewed interest in his work, culminating in a monograph by Alfred Frankenstein in 1953. This research revealed that many paintings previously attributed to Harnett were actually by Peto (1854-1907), another accomplished trompe-l'oeil artist. Interest in Harnett's masterful painting has continued to mount.

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