

Fooling the Eye

TROMPE L'OEIL AT THE SPRINGVILLE MUSEUM

History of Trompe L'oeil

Trompe l'oeil is a term from the French and means, literally, "that which deceives the eye." Although the term was first applied to extremely realistic still lifes in the 18th Century, it is now applied to almost any kind of art that uses painting techniques, perspective, and the ability to reproduce realistic images in such a way as to fool viewers' eyes into perceiving an image as three-dimensional. Based on this definition, artists and artisans have been creating Trompe l'oeil art since the discovery of perspective techniques. We know the style dates as far back as 400 B. C. and was part of the rich culture of the Greek and Roman Empires. The earliest examples remaining are the tile floors and Roman frescoes at Pompeii and Herculaneum, preserved by the ash that filled the rooms when Vesuvius erupted.

These murals used painting techniques that created the look of three-dimensional details such as texture and dimension. In addition, painters created pretend views from nonexistent windows as well as architectural details such as moldings and carvings. Trompe l'oeil tile floors ranged from ones that used blocks of different shades to give the effect of different levels to an elaborate tile floor with very real-looking bits of refuse left there by the occupants. Called "Unswept Floor," the remaining mosaic is known to be a copy of an earlier Greek version.

Pliny the Elder, (a Roman scholar), in his *Natural History*, reports a story of a famous rivalry between the artists Zeuxis and Parrhasius (about 400 BC) After being challenged by Parrhasius as to who could produce the most realistic painting, Zeuxis pulled the drapes from in front of his painting and birds flew down from the sky to peck at the painted grapes. The master then turned to his opponent in triumph and said "Draw back the curtain and reveal your painting." Parrhasius knew he had won because the curtains were part of his painting. Pliny recounts another competition in which the winner's painted horses caused live horses to neigh in response. Although we do not know how true the stories are, they are evidence both for the existence of trompe l'oeil quality painting and for the culture's admiration of it. (Trompe L'oeil, Battersby p. 9)

As the Roman Empire declined, trompe l'oeil mostly disappeared, not resurfacing until the Renaissance and Baroque eras. The Italian painter Giotto introduced three dimensional conventions about 1300 AD, and then the use of shadows was added by his pupil Gaddi, giving painters the techniques they needed to produce a realism that could create trompe l'oeil effects in paintings. A further development occurred when the architect Brunelleschi solved perspective mathematically, which gave architects and artists the ability to create perspective with precision.

The muralists of the 1400 and 1500s—Andrea Mantegna, Paolo Uccello, and Paolo Veronese —experimented with perspective and found they could use trompe l'oeil

architecture as they strove to paint what architect Leone Alberti called "a window into space." Churches used trompe l'oeil to create appropriate splendor for God's houses of worship and to "open" the ceiling or walls. These trompes ranged from small "carved" ornamentations on walls and ceilings to alter pieces to elaborate architectural effects such as the one in the Universitates Kirche in Vienna, which has a barrel-vaulted ceiling with a cupola painted onto one section. ([See page I, Appendix](#)) When a viewer is in the right position, the cupola appears real. However, like all trompes that depend on perspective, if viewers move from that position, the cupola no longer seems real.

Another story, surely apocryphal, tells that when Giotto was still an assistant in the studio, he once painted a fly on the end of the nose of a man in a painting being worked on. When the master came back the next morning, he spent several minutes trying to brush the fly off the canvas before realizing it was painted on. Sometime after Giotto, beautifully rendered flies were included in paintings as diverse as a virgin and child and an artist and his bride. Art historians speculate that these flies were symbols of decay and death, symbols used in the Vanitas pictures in later years. The ancient theme of Vanitas was explored as allegorical still lifes containing objects that symbolize the ephemeral nature of worldly pleasures and the inevitability of death. The artist Gybrechts created vanitas still lifes, but instead of using objects in a niche, as was traditional, he showed the objects as painted on a canvas, usually with a torn corner, or something to let the viewer know the objects are portrayed on a canvas. Another conceit which appeared was a "cartellino" which is a small "paper" tag near the bottom of the work with the artist's signature. These cards were typically rendered as old and creased, often with a bent corner.

In the 18th Century, the still lifes that originally spawned the term trompe l'oeil were popular. These paintings often used hunting equipment, guns, and hunting trophies. To be trompe l'oeil, the still lifes had to be self-contained—no partial views of a piece of furniture or a cloth drape were shown because the incompleteness of the picture would immediately signal to viewers that it is a painting; the scene extends beyond the picture plane. To fool viewers into thinking, at least for a moment, the scene or still life was real, the painting had to leave no clues it was two dimensional.

Other trompe l'oeil fashions were for niches with ultra-realistic floral arrangements or art objects, or paintings of musical instruments and music. Then shelves full of objects were followed by half open cupboards filled with books or objects. One complex trompe that became popular looked like a painting on an easel at first glance, with brushes and other painting paraphernalia including sketches on the easel, and another smaller painting leaning against the easel leg. In reality, all the objects were part of one painting. Trompe l'oeil paintings continued to evolve until they twisted back upon themselves in an ironic fashions with the creation of paintings which appeared to be the back of a painting, showing the stretcher bars, uneven edges of the canvas, and some sort of label. Thus, the paintings became a trompe l'oeil of a trompe l'oeil. (Illusion in Art p. 161, 162.) One other kind of trompe was very popular. It consisted of a letter rack with various notes, cards, and items tucked into the bands that criss cross the board and served to hold items in place in the days before push pins and thumb tacks.

A logical use of trompe l'oeil is for theater sets, which first occurred in the early 1600s, by Monteverdi. In addition, because trompe l'oeil painting was cheaper than architecture, trompe began to be used on facades of buildings. Hans Holbein the younger (1497-1543) painted a whole house. In central Europe during the Italian Renaissance, exterior trompes became fashionable, and then extravagant. Venetian and Roman schools supplanted the Florentines and churches were ornamented with exuberance as the Catholic Church responded to Protestantism's fanatical rejection of the ornate.

When Impressionism became fashionable in the late 1870s and early 1880s, trompe l'oeil work lost popularity in much of Europe. However, in the United States, where the public was more naive and untutored, trompe l'oeil paintings continued to be popular. In the mid to late 1880s, in the United States, William Harnett revived trompe l'oeil as still-life easel paintings. He often included musical instruments and firearms in his works. His best-known work is *After the Hunt*. Dismissed by the critics until 1945, the works were popular with the public. (Dictionary of Art) John Peto was another American trompe l'oeil artist. He specialized in battered letter rack paintings. He also created paintings featuring carved letters; these too were often battered looking.

Another form of trompe l'oeil, practiced from ancient times by artisans, was brought to the new world by immigrants. They used paint to make simple furnishings and buildings look more expensive. These techniques include wood graining—painting the grain of an expensive wood on cheaper wood such as pine, and marbling—painting wood and concrete to look like marble. Many of the older buildings in the state of Utah retain the original graining and marbling. One of the best known examples is the Tabernacle on Temple Square, in Salt Lake City. .

In Canada, research has verified the use of decorative painting by 1810 and trompe l'oeil work was done in Saint John as early as 1790 although it was not advertised in the newspapers until 1820 or so. The earliest examples are from the Maritimes— Quebec and Ontario. The paintings include trompe l'oeil murals and paintings, stenciling, striping, marbleizing, and painted stuccowork and ceiling friezes.

With the industrial revolution came fierce competition among companies, which led to advertising focused at the middle and lower classes. Out of this competition came such trompes as biscuit boxes disguised as a pile of real biscuits, decorative items like fried eggs in small dishes, napkins in rings, and baskets of real-looking fruit. Some use is still being made of trompe l'oeil art for advertising purposes, as shown by the image on page II, Appendix) This wall of a building in Vienna has been painted to look as if it had windows with cats sitting on the ledges. Aside from the other aspects that aren't real, the wall features a sign advertising *Whiskas* brand cat food.

The Surrealists revived trompe l'oeil painting but as an intellectual game instead of decoration. A good example is Magritte's painting of a canvas on an easel in front of a window. The painting on the canvas exactly matches the view out the window. (*La Condition Humaine I*, 1933) Trompe's renewal has occurred both among traditional-type trompes such as murals and decorative effects as well as among art that may or may not

be thought of as trompe. Anyone who has come upon one of Duane Hanson's figures seated on a bench and been startled to discover it was not an actual person would probably classify his art as trompe l'oeil. Art historians differ, however about whether the photorealists are really trompe l'oeil artists. Other artists, like Marilyn Levine, make objects from one art medium look like something else. Levine specializes in creating leather goods such as boots, satchels, and purses from ceramic. The well known artist M. C. Escher creates art which is border-line trompe, deceiving the eye with clever games of perspective rather than realistic rendering.

Today, some artists specialize in the various kinds of trompe l'oeil such as murals, architectural details, fake windows, pretend paintings, etc. At Thanksgiving Point, the restaurant "The Garden Wall" has many kinds of trompe l'oeil work on its walls. ([See the description of Thanksgiving Point](#)) A surprising number of artists advertise their trompe l'oeil work on the internet, creating everything from large murals to faux marbling. ([See background information on marbling.](#)) Other artists, such as the contemporary ones in the packet—Edith Roberson, Sam Wilson, and Greg Abbott, employ trompe l'oeil work within artworks that go beyond the intent of earlier trompe l'oeil works. Those artworks were meant to be faithful reproductions of a still life or other scene: they were meant to be "real". On the other hand, contemporary artists tend to use trompe l'oeil as a way to play or as an effect to stimulate questions and ideas, some of them about reality.

Their trompe effects may be closer to those used by the Surrealists than to the original creators of trompe l'oeil. The trompe effects are often contrasted with areas or objects that are obviously not real. They may be part of puns, such as in Greg Abbott's "cow uch" or they may be part of a personal exploration, such as in Sam Wilson's *Crow Crowded, or I Myself*. Peterson's piece *A Bit from the Studio of William C. Morris* is probably the most traditional trompe l'oeil piece, with clear references to the still lifes of the 1800s, especially if thought of in the context of what was apparently its original title, *Just an Old Door*. Creating that painting may have been an enjoyable exercise, just to prove Peterson could do it.

Roberson's *Channel Three* also has reference to an original trompe—the letter rack paintings. However, in Roberson's piece, the title, *Channel Three*, lets viewers know this work is part of a game, because no Channel Three exists, and Roberson would expect viewers to know that. The title may also refer to other meanings of channel. In addition, Roberson has included three jelly beans that appear to float above the bulletin board. While an illusion, it belies the aim of the still life artists who wanted only to reproduce reality. The inclusion of symbols, double meanings, puns, and self expression, while they take these works out of the realm of the original trompe l'oeil paintings, reflect with accuracy the art and society of this postmodern era.

REFERENCES AND SOURCES:

Books (from Brigham Young University Library—the library has quite a few other books

as well)

M.L. d'Otrange Mastai. Illusion in Art—Trompe l'Oeil—A History of Pictorial Illusion. New York:Abaris Books, 1975. BYU call #ND 1390.M37

Celestine Dars. Images of Deception—THE ART OF TROMPE-L'IL. Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1979. BYU call # ND 1390.D34

Martin Battersby. Trompe L'oeil—The Eye Deceived. New York: St Martin's Press, 1974. BYU call # ND 1471.B37

Miriam Milman. TROMPE-L'IL PAINTING. New York:SKIRA/Rizzoli, 1982. BYU call # ND 1390.M513

Magazine Articles

Norman Kolpas. "Truths of the Spirit." *Southwest Art*, May 1999: pp. 46-50. (The article is about contemporary painter William Acheff. His work is of fool-the-eye quality although it lacks the true tromp's format of an entire set of objects or section of a wall or cabinet. Acheff does say he had a man argue that the beading in his paintings were real beads. His paintings feature mostly Southwestern themes using native american pots, blankets, clothing and artifacts as well as typical foods such as onions, chili peppers, and indian corn.

Bonnie Gangelhoff. "The Nature of Beauty." *Southwest Art*, May 1999: pp. 69-73, 149. (The article is about the contemporary artist Daniel Sprick who paints still lifes of everyday objects such as milk cartons , often with some surrealist element such as a floating flower. Not strictly Trompe l'oeil work, Sprick's work is rendered in a trompe style beautiful realism but the paintings have more meaning than just beauty.)

Internet Sources (I found these and others through www.hotbot.com using trompe l'oeil as the exact phrase.)

<http://www.saintjohn.nbcc.nb.ca/~Heritage/PaintedLadies>

This is an excellent site with 17 pages. It begins with an introduction to Trompe L'oeil and then has history and examples from trompe l'oeil works in Saint John, Canada. The visuals are high quality and varied. If you don't want to type in the whole address, use a browser and search for "Introduction to Trompe L'oeil. "

<http://users.senet.com.au/~rfrancis/> Has great images of large murals including two from one house. The room has a Mediterranean Sea view for the husband and an Italianate garden seen through arches for the wife. This site has several links including the following:

<http://users.senet.com.au/~rfrancis/techniqu.htm#perspective> An example of a perspective drawing and the finished mural, based on the drawing.

<http://www.wrightart.com/furniture/furniture.htm> This site has the best images of trompe l'oeil painted furniture I found. It also has some good murals. Unfortunately, it also

contains a link to a page of contemporary work which contains a couple of non detailed but never-the-less inappropriate artworks. However, it is easy to avoid the link if the teacher is in control.