

Con Artists: Three Trompe L'Oeil Painters

BY JEANNE SCHINTO



Researchers have shown that a pitiable four to 30 seconds is the average time a museum-goer spends looking at any given painting. But I would like to know how long the typical visitor spends before a work of trompe l'oeil. Down through the ages, the creators of these seductive still lifes, designed to “fool the eye,” have dared us to find the flaw, the place where the illusion of reality breaks down. The effort often causes us to linger.

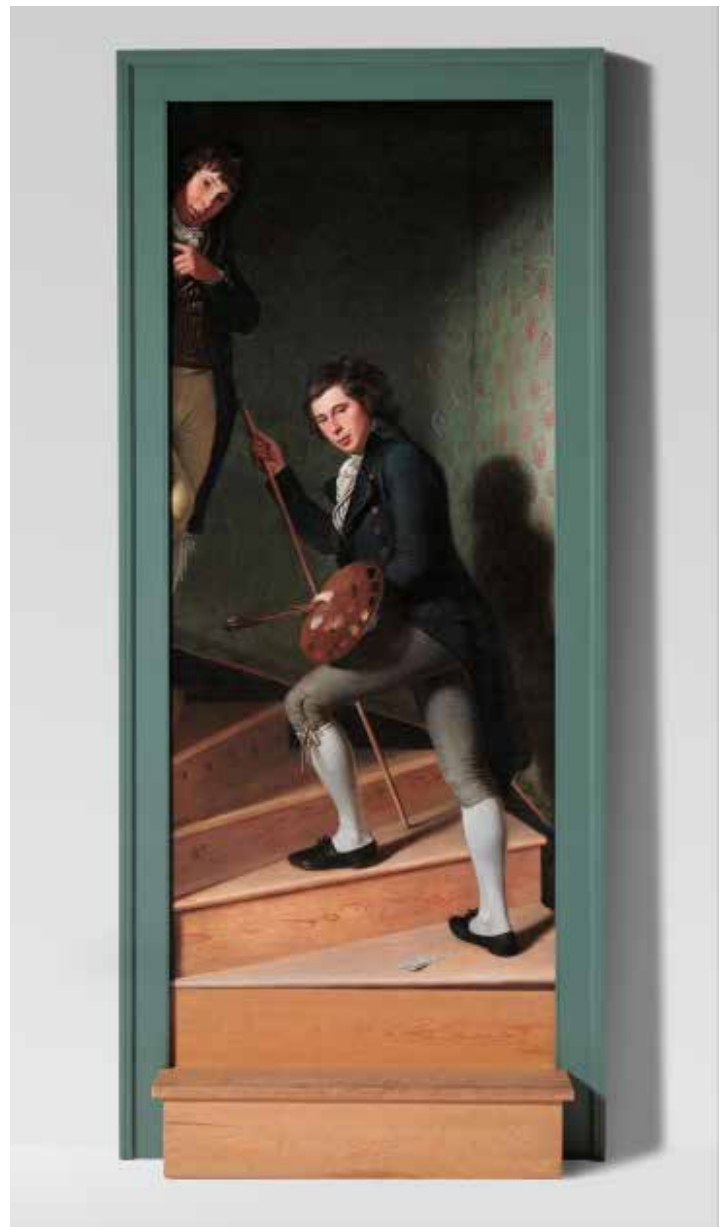
The critic Alfred Frankenstein's seminal 1953 book on American trompe l'oeil painting, *After the Hunt*, traces this genre's history from 19th-century saloon curiosity into the 1930s, when it was “rediscovered” by the Manhattan art dealer Edith Halpert, whose Downtown Gallery invented the commercial market for American folk art. Frankenstein quotes a minister who, having seen William Michael Harnett's lifelike *Old Violin* at the Minnesota State Fair in 1887, denounced it as meritless trickery. He warned his congregants, however, that they'd have to “look long and closely and from

David Brega (b. 1948)

Nature Boy

2012, Oil on Masonite, 36 x 28 in.

Palm Avenue Fine Art, Sarasota



Charles Willson Peale (1741-1827)

Staircase Group (Portrait of Raphaele Peale and Titian Ramsay Peale I)

1795, Oil on canvas, 89 1/2 x 39 3/8 in.

Philadelphia Museum of Art



David Brega (b. 1948)

Homage

1990-91, Oil on Masonite, 74 x 48 in.

Manoogian Collection, Taylor, Michigan

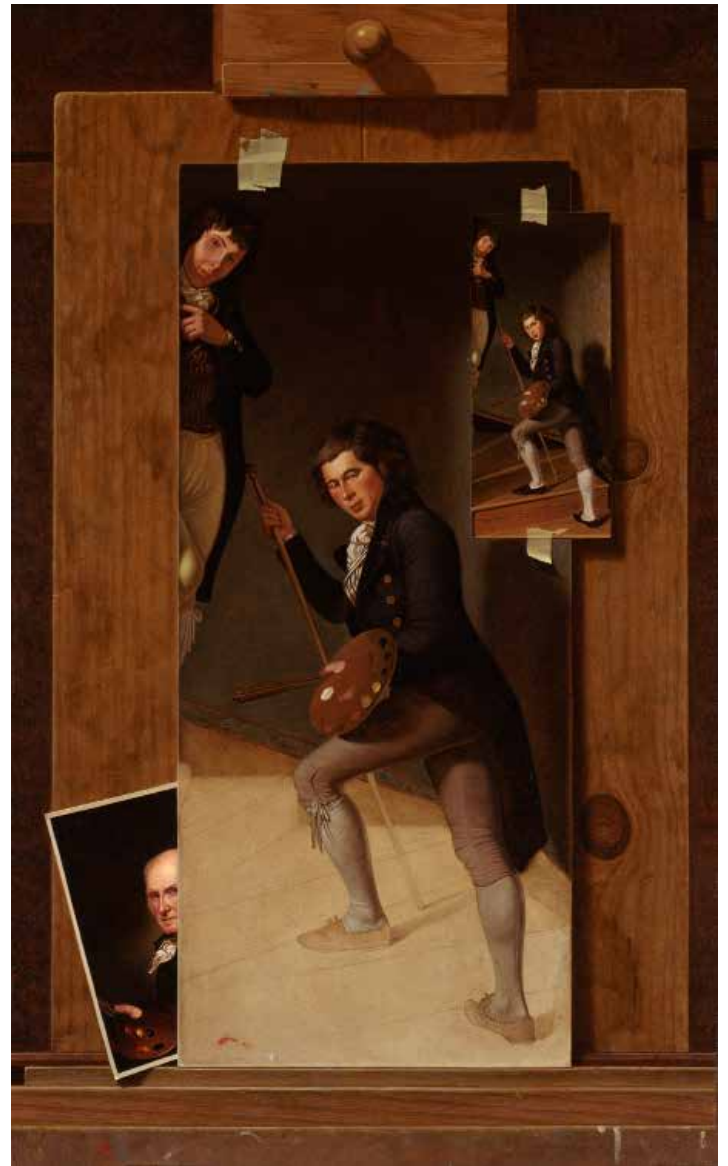
I.” (His twin, Douglas, is a gifted watercolorist.) “We were jocks who played high school football and basketball. We’d watch someone swing a bat and copy them. We were drawing cartoons when we were kids, so then we happened to get to the right art school.” That institution was the Paier School of Art in New Haven, Connecticut, now called Paier College of Art and relocated to nearby Hamden. Brega says his most influential

different angles” to see that it was a painting at all “rather than ‘a real violin hung on a pair of old wooden shutters with a broken hinge.’”

We all like to imagine that we’re not easily duped, as George Washington reportedly was when, in Rembrandt Peale’s words, he “bowed politely” to the painted figures in Charles Willson Peale’s *Staircase Group*. Yet most of us are continually deceived — and delighted to be so — by the best trompe l’oeil artists. Here are three virtuosi working today.

PERFECT LIES

The first solo show of 16 trompe l’oeil paintings by David Brega (b. 1948) took place at Manhattan’s Alexander Gallery in 1986. It sold out in 15 minutes. Today his pictures are in many important private and public collections, including those of Michigan’s Richard Manoogian and the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art in Kansas City. Of his ability to make oil on Masonite look uncannily like arrangements of three-dimensional objects, the East Longmeadow, Massachusetts, native says, “We were born with good eye-hand coordination, my brother and



David Brega (b. 1948)

Pealin’ off the Peales

1997, Oil on Masonite, 32 x 19 1/2 in.

Collection Paul and Linda Perkins, First Community National Bank



Michael Theise (b. 1959)

George Gets a Promotion

2005, Oil on board, 5 1/8 x 9 in.

Private collection, courtesy Shannon's Fine Art Auctioneers, Milford, Connecticut

teacher there was Ken Davies, whom he calls “invaluable.” “The setup is the thing,” he explains. “That’s what trompe is all about — that’s what I pride myself on — and it stems from a basic exercise Ken taught in composition.”

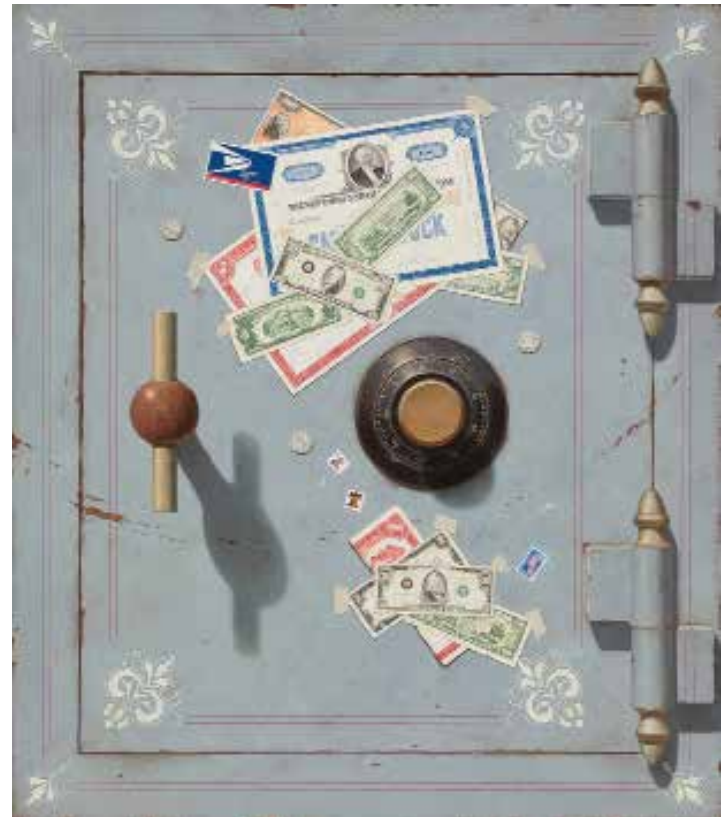
Every talent needs discipline, however, and Brega says that a crucial chapter in his education came during a long apprenticeship in California and Nevada, painting, of all things, billboards. “That’s what catapulted the skill,” he recalls. “Spending hours mixing colors and then going out and painting anything from faces to cars to shiny bottles.” A billboard he did of the comedian George Carlin went up at a traffic light on the Sunset Strip. “It was like a drive-in movie screen. The pupil of Carlin’s eye was larger than my head.”

What has made Brega’s oeuvre exceptional is not only his skill, which is, by all accounts, on par with that of 19th-century America’s most revered practitioners — W.M. Harnett, John Haberle, J.D. Chalfant, De Scott Evans, and John F. Peto. It’s also his ability to fuse seamlessly the traditional elements of trompe with a contemporary sensibility and subjects. *Nature Boy* of 2012, for example, features a photograph of Aerosmith’s Steven Tyler on a fabricated cover of *Time* magazine. A page of sheet music has been tucked behind it. The song, beloved by Tyler in childhood, is “Nature Boy” by Eden Ahbez, a hippie precursor who achieved cult status in the mid-20th century, just as Tyler did later. In typical trompe manner, both magazine cover and music are seemingly fastened to a door with bits of tape. It’s hard to resist the touch test. “I ask people, if they take the tape off, to please put it back in the same place,” Brega says with a smile.

Landscapes are perhaps at the farthest remove from what a trompe artist should tackle. Yet Brega made landscape the subject of his 1990-91 tour de force, *Homage*. “I wanted to paint a landscape, but I was known

for trompe, so I incorporated landscapes into a trompe,” he explains. At the center of *Homage*, which at 74 by 48 inches is an unusually large trompe, is an unfinished landscape painting on an easel. “This scene never existed. It only exists here,” Brega says. “It’s actually my attempt at a Hudson River School painting.”

Small reproductions of eight more landscapes are attached to the painting’s frame and easel. These are Brega’s inspirations — works by Thomas Cole, Asher B. Durand, Martin Johnson Heade, Albert Bierstadt, Frederick Edwin Church, Sanford Robinson Gifford, Worthington Whittredge, and George Inness. Here are also the *cartes-de-visite* of all these artists, except Bierstadt and Gifford. In their place are photographs of Alexander Helwig Wyatt and of Alexander Gallery owner Alexander Acevedo. Brega added the likeness simply because he admired the



Michael Theise (b. 1959)

Keeping it Safe

2009, Oil on board, 41 1/2 x 36 in.

Private collection, courtesy Shannon's Fine Art Auctioneers, Milford, Connecticut



Ken Davies (b. 1925)
A Rack of Fans
 1980, Oil on Masonite, 31 1/2 x 22 1/2 in.
 Manoogian Collection, Taylor, Michigan

19th-century landscapist's beard. As for Acevedo, "He inspired the whole painting," which amounts to a series of virtuosic impersonations in paint.

Today *Homage* is owned by Manoogian, who also acquired the Whittredge and Inness canvases portrayed here. "I've borrowed *Homage* back a few times," says Brega. "And every time, I find it exhausting to look at. What was I thinking? The frame was the hardest part. The rest I got from the billboard business, but the gold leaf required the building up of colors to create the little highlights, the reflected light, and the shadows."

One of those borrowings back was for Brega's 2000 retrospective, *Oil and Water*. That show's title came from its two equal parts, the second devoted to his twin Douglas's career. It was held at the Michele & Donald D'Amour Museum of Fine Arts in Springfield, not far from where the brothers grew up. David Brega now lives in Marshfield, Massachusetts, where he raised a family and regularly plays golf.

THE COLOR OF MONEY

"It was Inauguration Day 1993, and I was in Old Lyme [Connecticut] looking around the Cooley Gallery," Michael Theise (b. 1959) recalls of a life-changing moment more than 20 years ago. At the time, he had long hair and sported a big leather jacket and unlaced boots. "I looked like the kind of guy you'd better keep an eye on," he says. But as he and Jeff Cooley watched President Clinton being sworn in on the gallery's television, Theise summoned the courage to ask if the gallerist had any interest in trompe, because he had a couple in his car trunk. Cooley remembers thinking they would probably be "either stolen, fake, or really bad." They were none of

Michael Theise (b. 1959)
Monopoly Box
 2008, Oil on board, 10 1/4 x 20 in.
 Collection of the artist





Ken Davies (b. 1925)
The Bookcase
 1950, Oil on canvas, 22 x 45 in.
 Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford

“resting” on 17th- and 18th-century European trompes. Fourth, laws of gravity must be heeded. Hence, the painted tape or other fasteners, “because there has to be something holding up the bills.” So where does one sign a trompe painting of money? To preserve the illusion of reality, Theise says, “I always sign as Secretary of the Treasury.”

Since his first show at Cooley Gallery on April Fool’s Day 1993, Theise has been unusually successful. Nonetheless, he acknowledges that trompe can be a tough sell. One doesn’t decorate an entire house with it. In light of that fact, this husband and father of two has a day job, managing a Stop & Shop grocery store near his home in Wallingford, Connecticut. “I’ve always had to be employed. It takes the pressure off,” he explains. Only after hours comes the art: “I paint every day, usually from about five in the afternoon to midnight.”

Theise says he sometimes makes a painting just to exercise his technical prowess. Yet this genre can be humbling. “I’d just finished painting

the above. Stunned, Cooley asked how many more Theise had. “I told him I had a houseful. He said, ‘If you do, I’ll give you a show.’” Theise lived in nearby West Haven, so Cooley headed there pronto. When he left, Theise’s wife was livid. “That guy just drove away with your whole lifetime of work and didn’t even give you a receipt,” she said. Sure enough, Cooley sold one of the paintings as he unloaded his van. He told the collector, who usually bought only 19th-century works, “I’ve just discovered, if not the best, then one of the best trompe artists working in the U.S. today.”

Money is Theise’s specialty. It’s a subject many trompe artists, notably Haberle and Otis Kaye (1885-1974), have embraced over the years. “I focused on money because I felt it was probably the most challenging subject,” says Theise, who uses pins and sharpened toothpicks to scratch out the tiniest details in oil on board. He also likes the idea that there’s “a whole other conversation going on” about pictures of bills. “People ask me, ‘You’re allowed to paint money?’ ‘Is it art?’ ‘Have you ever considered counterfeiting?’ And I reply, ‘What would be the point? It’s worth so much more as a painting.’”

Theise grew up in Connecticut and, like the Brega twins, found his way to Paier and to Ken Davies. As a freshman, however, he almost didn’t make it. “I made a real mess of it,” Theise admits. He’d just come from an all-boys Catholic high school — “a regimented place with lots of rules, where everyone was on time, wearing ties, so I was ready to let loose.” As a sophomore at Paier, he settled down. Seeing a work by Davies, *A Rack of Fans*, was a turning point. Letter racks — thumbtacked envelopes and pages of correspondence — have long been a trompe theme. Davies’s arrangement of folding fans, held in place by ribbons and tacks, riffs on it. “I was in my formative years, trying to figure out where I would fit into art,” Theise recalls. “The school had displayed *A Rack of Fans* on an easel, roped off with a light on it. I can still remember thinking, ‘How did somebody do that?’ Seeing it and being amazed probably set me on a path.”

Whether because of, or despite, his rule-bound parochial-school past, Theise says he enjoys following the rules of trompe. The first rule is that subjects must be relatively flat. “Ken says no more than two inches deep. I think it’s even less,” Theise explains. Second, the subject must be presented in its actual size, uncropped. Third, it must be something stationary or that at least holds still, like the flies one frequently sees

William Michael Harnett (1848-1892)
Old Models
 1892, Oil on canvas, 54 3/8 x 28 1/4 in.
 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



Ken Davies (b. 1925)
The Sword
1950, Oil on canvas, 40 7/8 x 31 7/8 in.
Detroit Institute of Arts

the back of a bill, and I was sitting looking at it, when my son came in to say goodnight,” Theise recounts. “I showed him the painting, and he told me the background green didn’t look right. I went for a walk and when I came back, I saw that, son of a gun, he was right. Here’s a little kid, but he’s handled money. Everybody knows when it doesn’t make sense.”

WISE GUY

Now retired from teaching, Ken Davies (b. 1925) lives in Madison, Connecticut. When he was in his 20s, he held the distinction of being among the very few living artists included in Frankenstein’s groundbreaking book. As a child in New Bedford, Massachusetts, Davies had attracted attention for his artistic abilities, and, with a talent for sleight-of-hand tricks, he put on magic shows for family, friends, and neighbors.

In 1942, just before his successful interview at what is now Boston’s Massachusetts College of Art and Design, Davies made his first trip to an art museum. There, at the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, he happened to see Harnett’s *Old Models*. The painting, he recalls, “blew my mind.” After two years of study in Boston, partially funded by his magic shows, Davies was drafted to fight in World War II. Afterwards, thanks to the G.I. Bill, he enrolled in the B.F.A. program at Yale University, where, as a senior under the direction of Lewis York, he finally painted his first trompe. “York was one of the best instructors I’ve ever known,” Davies declares. “He’d listen to what you wanted to do and let you do it, whether it was totally abstract or totally realistic.” Davies has always been grateful he graduated just before the abstractionist Josef Albers arrived as chairman of Yale’s art department.

While still there, Davies met Lincoln Kirstein. The legendary art patron and impresario was visiting Yale with Edwin Hewitt, whose eponymous gallery championed realism in the 1950s, when abstract expressionism was rocketing skyward. “It was a very important day in my life. But I didn’t know it at the time,” Davies notes. “They were looking for new recruits. They gave me a show in New York. If it weren’t for Kirstein and Hewitt, I don’t know where I’d be today.” Davies sold “just about everything” he had given to Hewitt, but it took him so long to complete one painting, he simply couldn’t make a living in art. Some time later, he started his 40-year teaching stint at Paier.

While Davies includes Brega and Theise among a handful of “top-notch” students he has taught, trompe wasn’t this mentor’s sole artistic interest. By his count, he has completed only 30 of these labor-intensive paintings over the course of his career. Interestingly, in *Painting Sharp Focus Still Lives*, his 1975 how-to book ostensibly about trompe techniques, Davies wrote, “I don’t believe there’s a great difference between using the wooden wall of a barn as the backdrop for a trompe l’oeil still life, and painting the entire barn in its own setting. Each entity can be part of a still life — the barn building, the tree, the pump, and the logs can be considered separate setups within the whole.”

Indeed, Davies believes all his work is “abstract,” even the trompes. “It’s abstract design, but realistically rendered,” he says. In *Ken Davies: American Realist*, a kind of autobiography published in 2009, he observes how many of his paintings, including trompes, are derived from pure shapes of light, shadow, and objects. Yet he still does seem to have taken delight all these years in the simple pleasure of fooling people with his paintbrush.

Davies enjoys, for example, the fact many people think “some wise guy” tacked a cartoon to his painting *The Bookcase*. Now owned by Hartford’s Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, this is a trompe of shelved books — *Is Sex Necessary?* by Thurber and White, *The Life and Times*



of Thomas Jefferson by Watson, *Origins of the Safety Pin* by Ruggles, and other titles — that Davies found in his first father-in-law’s summer cottage. Davies’s student-turned-colleague Theise says, “It takes a little time for someone who’s not used to seeing trompe to get their head around it. Even after you explain it, they’re like, ‘Okay, but why did you tape it on?’ And then you have to tell them the tape’s painted, too.”

To be sure, it’s more difficult to fool a sophisticated looker, and the most sophisticated of all would be a colleague. That’s why Pliny’s famous story of Zeuxis and Parrhasius is so compelling. A contest pitted these two Greek artists against each other, to see who could create the more convincing illusion. Zeuxis painted grapes that birds tried to eat. Impressive. But when he went to pull back the drape to see what Parrhasius had wrought, he knew instantly he had been bested. He was trying to grasp a painting of a drape. After that, you can bet he did what any innocent would. Paying Parrhasius the highest compliment that an artist can receive from anyone, Zeuxis undoubtedly just kept looking. ■

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