
Art Review

Trompe l'Oeil: Seeing Is Not Believing

by Bonnie James

Deceptions and Illusions: Five Centuries of Trompe l'Oeil Painting

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After visiting the National Gallery of Art's new exhibit, I found myself wondering, what, really, is the difference between *trompe l'oeil*¹, and what we call Art. In one sense, all art is *trompe l'oeil*. Every painting or drawing takes a three-dimensional space and creates a more-or-less believable image of that space on a two-dimensional surface. The difference is in the *intent* of the artist: In a great work of art, the artist masters the techniques required—and invents new “tools”—to give him greater power to convey profound ideas, whose purpose is to elevate, uplift, inspire, educate, and even improve the character of the citizen. On the other hand, the *trompe l'oeil* artist employs the same tools to trick you into believing, if only for a moment, that illusion is reality. You might even say that the “special-effects” wizards who produce today's popular movies, are the 21st-Century version of *trompe l'oeil* masters.

But, with *trompe l'oeil* art, as opposed to the Hollywood magicians, there is a more serious objective: It shows you, in a playful and humorous way, that seeing is not necessarily believing, i.e., that your senses can fool you, and that truth is not found—as the materialist philosophers from Aristotle through Immanuel Kant would have it—in seeing, tasting, touching, smelling, and hearing. This is precisely the idea in the “Allegory of the Cave,” from Plato's *Republic*: that the eye—sense certainty—can deceive.

The Renaissance Invention of Perspective

With the astounding developments of the 15th-Century Italian Renaissance, the ability of artists to depict real space in two dimensions took a giant leap forward. The break-

through centered around the invention of scientific perspective.

At the beginning of the 14th Century, Florentine artists such as Cimabue and Giotto began to break with the old Byzantine style, whose primary interest was in creating icons for religious devotion, and to experiment with portraying believable human figures in naturalistic space. The writer Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-75), author of the *Decameron*, wrote about Giotto (1267-1337): “There was nothing in the whole of creation that he could not depict with his stylus, pen, or brush. And so faithful did he remain to Nature . . . that whatever he depicted had the appearance, not of a reproduction, but of the thing itself.” A later writer, Antonio Averlino, known as Filarete (c. 1400-70), in his *Treatise on Architecture*, wrote, “We also read that Giotto, while young, painted flies that fooled his master Cimabue. He thought they were alive, and tried to shoo them off with a cloth.”

We know that artists, sculptors, and architects (notably Masaccio, Ghiberti, Donatello, and Brunelleschi) were already employing the principles of scientific perspective as early as 1401, when Filippo Brunelleschi and Lorenzo Ghiberti produced their famous competition panels for the Baptistery doors of the Cathedral of Florence. Masaccio's revolutionary fresco *The Holy Trinity* of 1426, brilliantly employs the new science of perspective to create the illusion of a circular niche, carved into the wall, in which the figures each occupy a distinct space within a receding perspective.

And so, while developing the tools which would later be used in *trompe l'oeil*, the *intent* of the Renaissance artist was entirely different. The Renaissance artist employed his skills to recreate the visible and intelligible world in his art, in such a way that it became capable of transmitting, through the use of metaphor and paradox, what the poet Shelley would later call, “profound and impassioned conceptions respecting man and nature.”

Classical Roots?

While the exhibit attempts to trace the roots of *trompe l'oeil* to Roman times, and even to Classical Greece, the several examples of wall paintings from Roman villas, and so forth, do not really “trick the eye.” The catalogue, however, cites an amusing anecdote from the Roman, Pliny the Elder (23/24-79 A.D.), concerning the work of the Greek painter Zeuxis (active 435-390 B.C.): “Zeuxis . . . painted a child carrying grapes, and when birds flew to the fruit . . . he strode up to the picture in anger with it, and said, ‘I have painted the grapes better than the child; if I had made a success of that as well, the birds would inevitably have been afraid of it.’ ” In a second anecdote, Zeuxis is fooled by a curtain painted by his rival Parrhasios (active 440-390 B.C.): Parrhasios “entered into a contest with Zeuxis, who produced a picture of grapes so successfully represented, that birds flew up to the stage-

1. A French idiom, meaning literally, to fool or deceive the eye (pronounced “tromp loy”).

FIGURE 1



This painting by Jan Gossaerts, “Portrait of a Merchant” (1530), belongs more to the highly realistic tradition of the Northern Renaissance than to *trompe l’oeil*.

buildings; whereupon Parrhasios himself painted such a realistic picture of a curtain, that Zeuxis, proud of the verdict of the birds, requested that the curtain should now be drawn and the picture displayed; and when he realized his mistake, with a modesty that did him honor, he yielded up the prize, saying that, whereas he had deceived the birds, Parrhasios had deceived him, an artist.”

Trompe l’Oeil or Just Good Painting?

The anomaly of this exhibition—that it draws a very blurry line between *trompe l’oeil* and the highly realistic paintings of, especially, the early Northern Renaissance—as can be observed in the beautiful 1530 *Portrait of a Merchant* by the Netherlandish artist Jan Gossaert (**Figure 1**). Exquisitely detailed elements identify the sitter’s profession: He is shown writing in a ledger; two finely rendered batches of paper are affixed to the wall behind him, and other accoutrements of his work are placed on the desk before him. The man’s expression is guarded and watchful, as befits one

FIGURE 2



Rembrandt’s student Gerrit Dou plays with perspective and illusion in “Painting with Pipe and Book” (1645).

whose activities are concerned with account books and financial transactions. This work could perhaps be called “illusionistic,” but hardly “*trompe l’oeil*,” since the object of the artist is not to fool the eye, but to provide an insightful portrait, and perhaps show off his great skill in rendering believable detail.

A later work by Rembrandt’s first student, Gerrit Dou, also challenges the nomenclature: *Painting with Pipe and Book* (**Figure 2**), dated 1645. In it, a young man leans forward from an arched niche in the wall. One edge of an open book falls over the ledge, on which the man is resting his elbow, casting a shadow on the wall below. He is smoking a pipe, and a burning ember in the pipe’s bowl subtly adds to the impression that the young man is alive and breathing. Across the top of the picture, there is a curtain rod, on which a green curtain hangs; the curtain has been pulled aside to reveal the scene within. It was common in Dutch households of the mid-17th Century to hang such a curtain in front of a painting to protect it from the dirt and grime of the household. This one looks so real, that your immediate impulse is to reach out and touch it, as a “reality check.” In fact, it

FIGURE 3



"Two Women at a Window" (c. 1655-60), by the Spanish painter Bartolomé Esteban Murillo.

takes extraordinary self-control to restrain yourself from touching many of the objects and works of art in this exhibition, and the guards are kept busy reminding people to keep their distance.

A painting by the Venetian artist Sebastian del Piombo, *Cardinal Bandinello Sauli and Three Companions* (1516), borrows from the apocryphal story above about Giotto: A fly, which appears to be, not on the surface of the Cardinal's garment, but on the surface of the painting, is painted so accurately, that, reportedly, printers, including those from *National Geographic* magazine, occasionally "corrected" it by eliminating it in reproductions!

Another wonderful example of an illusionistic painting is *Two Women at a Window* (c. 1655-60) (**Figure 3**) by the great Spanish painter, and contemporary of Velázquez, Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, in which two young women, painted life-size, peer from a window; one leans forward into the viewer's space, her left arm and right elbow resting on the window sill; the other peers from behind a foreshortened shutter, pulled back into the space of the room; this "inside-outside" effect enhances the impression of reality.

One of the most amusing works is *Escaping Criticism* (1874) (**Figure 4**), a true *trompe l'oeil* (it was originally titled,

FIGURE 4



"Escaping Criticism" (1874), a humorous *trompe l'oeil*, by the Catalan painter Pere Borrell del Caso, is usefully compared to the Murillo.

Una cosa che no pot ser, or *An Impossible Thing*), by the Catalan painter Pere Borrell del Caso—the signature work of this exhibition—which is usefully compared to the Murillo. Here, a young boy literally leaps from inside the picture frame, a look of alarm on his face, clothes disheveled, as if running for his life. His right foot extends over the edge of the frame, as does his left hand. His head and shoulders are thrust into our space. The natural impulse of the viewer is to extend a hand to help the boy step out of the "frame," and thus aid in his "escape."

Also included, as the finale of this otherwise provocative exhibit, are the works of 20th-Century cubists (Picasso and Duchamp), surrealists (Magritte), and pop artists (Oldenburg, Warhol, etc.), muddying its overall impact—although this final room has another startling surprise, which you might miss, especially if the museum is crowded that day.

One final note: This is a great exhibit for kids, as I found when I took two boys, ages 10 and 11, to see it. They will have a wonderful time figuring out all the little "tricks," and may even learn something important about what is "true" and what is only "appearance."