

Slow Art: The Pleasures of Trompe l'Oeil



I have a confession to make.

In the course of writing my book on art and illusion in the early republic, I was taken in by a trompe l'oeil object.

It was October 2002. I had completed my doctoral dissertation the previous year and was just beginning the work of revising it for publication. In the meantime, I had contributed a number of entries to an exhibition catalogue for a large show about trompe l'oeil that was being organized by the National Gallery of Art, *Deceptions and Illusions: Five Centuries of Trompe l'Oeil Painting*. At the exhibition's opening, I was thrilled to see many of the pictures I had studied, pondered, and written about. Cleverly positioned near a museum staircase was Charles Willson Peale's trompe l'oeil *Staircase Group* (1795), a double portrait of Peale's sons Raphaëlle and Titian Ramsay that reportedly fooled no less a figure than George Washington back in the day. In another room I encountered the marine artist Thomas Birch, leaning out from the space of his portrait to rest his arm on the picture frame. Elsewhere was Raphaëlle Peale's masterful *Venus Rising from the Sea—A Deception* (c. 1822), which appeared to conceal a picture of a female nude behind a cloth. According to family lore, Raphaëlle's wife—presumably peeved by her husband's naughty imagination—took a swipe at the painting in an attempt to remove the cloth.

I knew all the tricks of trompe l'oeil walking into this exhibition. I knew the

stories of spectators deceived by wily pictures, of birds that pecked at painted grapes and dogs that climbed the step of the *Staircase Group*. I knew better than to get taken in by an illusion. And then my vanity got the better of me.

I rounded the corner of a gallery and spied the exhibition catalogue resting on a bench. Another reader had carelessly left it upside down and open, so that its cover was clearly visible and its spine within easy reach. I hadn't yet laid my hands on a copy of the catalogue, and I was eager to see own my own entries in print. I made a beeline for the bench. I grasped the book.

It didn't budge.

It was a fake. An expertly crafted simulacrum of the real catalogue, affixed to the bench and perfectly positioned to ensnare the gullible. I had been deceived.

In the space of an instant, I realized my mistake. Gasping with surprise, I beat a quick path out of the gallery, hoping that no one had witnessed my gaffe. I think I may have actually hidden behind my husband when I finally located him in another room. In a gushing whisper, I relayed the embarrassment of what had occurred. He took a long, steady look at me and burst into laughter. And then I began to laugh, too. Once we'd collected ourselves, we crept back into the gallery to inspect the trompe l'oeil catalogue, to marvel at its predatory conceit and its capacity to trump and surprise. For several long minutes, we enjoyed a good chuckle at ourselves. Well, at me.



Photograph by George Freeman

I've thought often of this incident over the past few years as I researched the ways in which spectators reacted to trompe l'oeil objects during the post-revolutionary decades. Between the 1790s and 1820s, in cities large and small, early national Americans created, displayed, experienced, and wrote about a tantalizing array of pictorial and optical deceptions, including trompe l'oeil portraits and still life paintings, like those made by the Peales and their Philadelphia cohort; "philosophical" instruments, such as solar microscopes, zograscopes, and phantasmagorias, that magnified tiny things to magnificent proportions, threw flat pictures into three dimensions, or generated illusions of ghosts; even mechanical devices—such as the "Invisible Lady," a popular visual and aural illusion—that vexed and delighted Americans up and down the East Coast for years. Spectators encountered these deceptions in an equally varied range of places, from Charles Willson Peale's Philadelphia Museum to taverns, houses, and assembly halls temporarily transformed into public exhibition rooms.

Into these spaces, spectators carried a host of assumptions about their abilities to detect a deception—and the cultural stakes of being able to do so. Common Sense philosophy taught early Americans to trust the evidence of their senses, to believe that perspicacious vision would see through illusion and discern the truth of a situation. Political writers turned this sensory faith to partisan advantage: Republicans advised the people to sharpen their eyes against Federalist deceit, while Federalists cautioned against Republican myopia. How, I wanted to know, was this politicization of the senses relevant to the concurrent culture of visual illusions? How did art and politics inform one another during the early republic?

I found some answers to these questions in the accounts of deceptions that early national Americans confided to letters and journals or published in newspapers, pamphlets, and books. Not unlike my own experience at the National Gallery, spectators exhibited a mixture of embarrassment and wonder in response to trompe l'oeil illusions. Such emotions may seem trivial (they did to Sir Joshua Reynolds, the period's leading British aesthetician, who never failed to remind his audiences that trompe l'oeil was cheap and vulgar in comparison to the civic-minded, edifying genre of history painting). But, like trompe l'oeil itself, there is more to these responses than initially meets the eye. Trompe l'oeil exacts several things of its spectators, and in the reactions it yields, we can understand something of its broader cultural and political significance.

First, trompe l'oeil is fun. There is good reason why so many early modern optical illusions were commonly known as "pleasing deceptions." Trompe l'oeil produces surprise, giggles, chatter, appreciation. It can make dupes of unwitting observers, serving them up for mockery to the bemusement of onlookers already in the know. Yet it also invites us to laugh at ourselves. It's safe to say that there are few genres of art capable of generating an adrenaline rush. But my own encounter with the trompe l'oeil catalogue proves that this can occur, and my research suggests that early national spectators experienced something similar.

Consider the case of the Invisible Lady. This enticing mechanical illusion took the form of a glass ball suspended by wires from a ceiling. A square railing surrounded the center, with trumpets positioned atop vertical posts at each corner. Entering the rooms in which this unusual contraption was installed, visitors encountered the sounds of the invisible woman who purportedly inhabited the space. Voices, breathing, and even singing seemed to emerge from the trumpets. And while it was clear that an unseen speaker could see the audience, she herself was nowhere to be seen. Spectators professed confusion—how did the deception work?—but mostly they expressed enjoyment. The illusion elicited admiration (its mechanics were so “ingeniously veiled as hitherto to elude all discovery,” effused one witness) and gave rise to flights of fancy (one wit claimed the lady “kissed some single gentlemen” but “blows upon married men and old bachelors”).

Accounts of the Invisible Lady reveal another crucial aspect about trompe l’oeil: it takes awhile to experience its ruses and pleasures. Critics like Reynolds often dismissed trompe l’oeil out of hand, presuming that its artistic purpose was ephemeral and its significance therefore negligible. But reports of the Invisible Lady suggest otherwise. Writers from *Poulson’s American Daily Advertiser* took their time at a Philadelphia exhibition of the illusion in 1804. Their narrative presents a careful inspection of the device and its environment, retracing the cautious movements they made around the gallery (“there are closets, but they are well closed, and in whatever part of the room you stand, the voice is heard from the trumpets only”). Such comments reveal trompe l’oeil to be an art of duration. It catches the eye (or ear or hand) in a second with its exacting simulations and imitations, but it also invites us to linger, marveling at its execution. To put it in twenty-first century terms, trompe l’oeil is slow art.

What’s more, these unhurried pleasures amount to a phenomenon that is less about being deceived than it is about undeceiving. Trompe l’oeil beckons the viewer close to inspect its surfaces and manufacture; it challenges us to look, touch, and listen, as the Invisible Lady’s admirers did, in order to understand the artistry by which it effects its illusions. It invites us to undeceive ourselves of the fiction before us, and in so doing, it posits that the senses can detect and explain deception.

It’s in this space of possibility that trompe l’oeil engaged early national concerns about dissimulation—about demagogues, counterfeiting, forgers, and charlatans—and tested the visual acuity of American citizens. Throughout the Revolutionary and early national periods, the capacity to discern differences between truth and falsehood, or to see through artifice and design, was prized as a sign of able citizenship. What did it mean, then, to encounter illusionistic objects at public exhibitions that staged this very challenge? The frequent display of trompe l’oeil pictures and optical devices invites us to understand early American exhibition rooms as spaces of citizen formation, as places where sensory perception was tested, honed, and performed. At Peale’s Museum, in art galleries, and in the vernacular sites where the Invisible Lady

was shown, the cultures of trompe l'oeil and politics coalesced around the prospect of undeceiving.

What of the early national spectators, then, who encountered trompe l'oeil catalogues at these exhibitions, as I did at the National Gallery? Well, that's a subject I explore in my book. A *real* book. You can even pick it up.

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