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Trompe l'oeil: The Art of Deception

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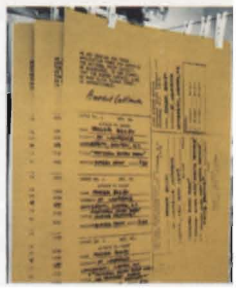
Trompe l'oeil: The Art of Deception

Frank Tuchfarber, THE OLD VIOLIN, 1887, chromolithograph, 34 7/8 x 24 in.
NAA-Gift of Bess Walt in memory of Edward J. Walt, Jr., 1988.N-688

Selections from the
Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery and Sculpture Garden
University of Nebraska-Lincoln
The Tenth Annual Sheldon Statewide Exhibition, 1996-97

Robert Arneson
1930-1992
BRICK MULTIPLE
1976, ceramic
each: 4 1/4 x 8 1/2 x 2 5/8 in.
UNL-F.M. Hall Collection
1991.H-2966 and H-2967



Roger Bailey
1940-
'POTSDAM ENTRY FORM' DURING PRINTING
n.d., silkscreen
16 1/2 x 13 1/2 in.
UNL-Thomas P. Coleman Memorial
1972.U-1046

Robert Arneson's ceramic bricks, part of a series of fifty created in 1976, appear at first glance to be common construction elements mass-produced for the building trades. You may ask why such mundane objects are included in an exhibition of trompe l'œil American art. Look again, before you allow your eye to be fooled. These bricks are original handmade objects, signed (stamped) by the artist with his name. In creating *Brick Multiple*, the artist suggests an abstract type of portraiture, further implying that while structures may fall into ruin, the brick and the artist's mark will endure.

UNL graduate Roger "Red" Bailey, currently a professor of art at St. Lawrence University in Canton, New York, has created a silkscreen print that "fools the eye" in several ways. The work involves an image of another silkscreen print, a photographic enlargement of a "call to entry" flyer for a juried exhibition, substituted for the original because it was so slick that pen or pencil would not adhere to the surface. Thus, it was impossible to enter the show. The artist cleverly pokes fun at the system while participating in it.

Nicholas Alden Brooks
1849-c.1904
TEN DOLLAR BILL
c.1880-1904, oil on canvasboard
6 3/4 x 10 in.
NAA-Extended loan from Anonymous donor
1991.L-24-91

Vija Celmins
1939-
UNTITLED
1975, aquatint
12 7/16 x 16 7/16 in.
UNL-F.M. Hall Collection
1990.H-2939

Paper currency is ideally suited to trompe l'œil reproduction by a capable artist such as Nicholas Alden Brooks. The artist's illusionist skills, his respect for and responsiveness to the elaborate faces of banknotes with their images and symbols, intricate embellishments and ornamental flourishes, signatures, numerals and letters in various styles are apparent in this oil on canvasboard painting. In a sense, the viewer finds his or her visual skills matched against the artist's delineative skills. What appears to be a ten-dollar bill is, in reality, a work of art of significantly greater value.

What do you see as you look at Vija Celmins untitled work? Is this a representational image of something seen in the natural world, perhaps a view of a starry night sky? In fact, the stars, ocean, and desert are among the artist's favorite motifs. When making a trompe l'œil illusion of stars, she works with slightly different telescopic photos of the same galaxy, recreating these photos using various media--graphite on paper, oil paint laboriously applied to canvas, or, in this case, the aquatint printmaking process--as she strives to achieve the most perfectly distilled image of reality possible.

Brian Connelly
1926-1962
STILL LIFE WITH FLOWERS
1952, casein on board
20 x 12 in.
UNL-Gift of Adams Bromley Sheldon
1959.U-211

Kenneth Davies
1925-
THE BLACKBOARD
1950, oil on canvas
20 x 26 in.
UNL-Gift of Mr. Arnott Folsom in memory of Mrs. E.C. Folsom
1953.U-108

Though his life ended prematurely at age thirty-six, artist Brian Connelly, primarily self-taught, established a reputation as a precise painter in the trompe l'œil tradition. A native of Oregon, Connelly studied the methods of 15th-century painters and traveled abroad before settling in Connecticut. *Still Life With Flowers* indicates the artist's attention to the transparent and reflective qualities of glass. A view of the formal garden glimpsed through the window, bubbles and reflections in the vase, shadows and drops of water on the sill all convey an illusion of reality.

Ken Davies has been involved with trompe l'œil painting since his graduation from the Yale School of Fine Art. Describing his early work, the artist writes, "My concern was painting an interesting composition of provocative objects so realistically that the viewer would be momentarily fooled into believing they were real." At the time he made *The Blackboard,* he says he could not resist the temptation to express his feelings about it. Look carefully at the area just to the right of the fishing plug to see if you agree with his admittedly immodest opinion.

TROMPE L'OEIL: THE ART OF DECEPTION

The tenth annual Sheldon Statewide exhibition, *Trompe l'œil: The Art of Deception,* marks a decade in the uniquely successful partnership between the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery and Sculpture Garden, our principal funding support group, the Nebraska Art Association, a nonprofit volunteer membership organization dedicated to the advancement of the visual arts in Nebraska, and twenty-two Nebraska communities that have served as exhibition venues in the past ten years. Local sponsors who support the exhibition in their community, and volunteer docents who disseminate vitally important information to the school children and adults of Nebraska have been equally invaluable to the success of Sheldon Statewide. Their generosity has enabled over 133,000 individuals to experience both the immediate and long-range goals of Sheldon Statewide with ten diverse exhibitions, listed at the right, each offering a mini-art history course focusing on Sheldon Gallery's renowned collection.

Curated by Sheldon Gallery Director, George Neubert, *Trompe l'œil: The Art of Deception* includes twenty works, paintings as well as sculptural objects, that are highly realistic and illusionistic. Trompe l'œil, a French term meaning to fool, or deceive, the eye, describes the rarest form of traditional still-life painting. It is illusionism carried beyond certainty to deception. To successfully fool the eye of the viewer, artists choose objects, situations and compositional devices using as little depth as possible. A flat surface stops the eye at the picture plane, while objects placed upon this surface seem to protrude, slightly, into the viewer's space. Archetypal trompe l'œil paintings are always still lifes, dealing with objects small enough to be represented in their natural size. Historically, the trompe l'œil tradition in painting is rooted in antiquity. After the sixteenth century, still-life and illusionistic representation was practiced and refined by Dutch, Spanish, Italian and German artists. Severin Roesen's *Still Life With Fruit and Champagne Glass*, c.1857, shows the influence of classic seventeenth-century Dutch conventions.

Nineteenth-century artist William Michael Harnett's painting, *Old Violin*, is the subject of Frank Tuchfarber's hand-painted chromolithograph on glass, a rare reproduction of this famous work. Trompe l'œil painting of paper currency was, and remains a characteristically American art form. Artists such as Nicholas A. Brooks and Otis Kaye, were extremely capable practitioners of this genre, a practice that baffled the Secret Service in the 1800s and resulted in passage of a bill by Congress in 1909 prohibiting all nonofficial copies of monetary tokens.

The work of contemporary artists remains true to the enduring tradition of trompe l'œil in American art. Some contemporary artists, such as Audrey Flack, Ralph Goings and Don Eddy rely on the camera to gather visual information before painting a facsimile of reality. In contrast, Paul Sarkisian's remarkable painting, reminiscent of the still lifes of Harnett, relies on careful, personal observation. Ceramists Richard Shaw and Richard Newman draw on historical precedents as they duplicate, in clay, the optical appearance of objects. Indeed, some observers may be unaware that they are looking at replications and not the actual objects. In exalting mundane objects these artists invite our thoughtful examination of their insightful reflection and interpretations of American culture.

Trompe l'œil: The Art of Deception, from the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery and Sculpture Garden serves as a primary example of the University of Nebraska's mission of outreach in sharing the visual art of America with the citizens of Nebraska.

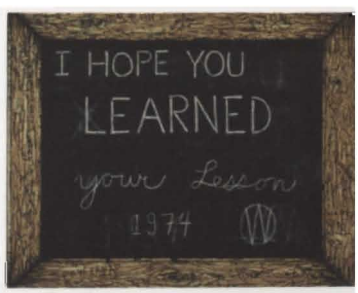
Nancy H. Dawson, Community Programs Coordinator

PREVIOUS SHELDON STATEWIDE EXHIBITIONS

1987-88
Miniature Masterworks
1988-89
Face to Face
1989-90
A Moment's Notice: Still Lifes
1990-91
The Eternal Horizon: Landscapes
1991-92
Fish, Fowl and Fauna
1992-93
Earth and Fire: Ceramics
1993-94
Pictures on Stone: American Color Lithography
1994-95
Statues to Sculpture
1995-96
Transparent and Opaque: Watercolors

Frank Tuchfarber
active: 1870-1890
THE OLD VIOLIN
1887,
chromolithograph
34 7/8 x 24 in.
NAA-Gift of Bess Walt in memory of Edward J. Walt, Jr.
1988.N-688

This rare Tuchfarber chromolithograph, printed on glass, is after William Harnett's popular trompe l'œil oil painting purchased by Tuchfarber "as soon as it was unpacked," at the 13th Cincinnati Industrial Exposition in 1886. The painting was enormously popular and guards were stationed to keep curious admirers from touching the flat canvas to test the illusion. *The Old Violin* was important to Tuchfarber because he was able to produce from it what became his most famous chromo painted in 1887, both on paper and on glass.



William T. Wiley
1937-
I HOPE YOU LEARNED YOUR LESSON
c.1974-75, etching
10 1/2 x 12 5/8 in.
UNL-F.M. Hall Collection
1984.H-2842

California artist William T. Wiley's highly personal style combines realism, abstraction and written commentary. Wiley's realistic etching depicting a slate blackboard resulted from his experience in receiving through the mail a small slate, stamped, and addressed to him from a friend in New York. The slate arrived broken in several pieces with only the frame intact. Wiley had to reassemble the fragments before reading the message, "I hope you learned your lesson." His response was, "The slate broke. I hope you learned **your** lesson."

Don Eddy
1944-
715 LEXINGTON
1974, acrylic on canvas
40 x 48 in.
NAA-Thomas C. Woods Memorial
1975.N-336

Complex reflections of highly polished silver tightly arranged in mirror and glass vitrines explore the relationship between perception and reality. Glass becomes the subject by which the artist examines the appearance of transparency and translucency. The window pane itself is as important to the artist as the fragmentary shapes that appear behind it as he creates a triple situation: surface, transparency allowing a second image and reflection of a third vision. In reality, the human eye cannot see all three separate images at the same time, but the artist makes the physiologically impossible seem logical.

Audrey Flack
1931-
BANANA SPLIT
c.1979, lithograph, screenprint, embossing
18 1/8 x 24 3/16 in.
UNL-F.M. Hall Collection
1993.H-3014

Audrey Flack paints from a female point of view, with the conviction that the purpose of art is to communicate. After beginning her career in the Abstract Expressionist idiom, she began to draw realistically, believing that "art is a continuous discovery into reality." She may spend weeks assembling and photographing a still-life composition, finally choosing one slide from which to make her painting. The image is projected onto a canvas and paint is applied with an airbrush. In *Banana Split* we see a highly sophisticated composition produced by the complex silk-screen printing process.

Ralph Goings
1928-
PIE CASE
1975, oil on canvas
24 x 34 1/8 in.
NAA-Nelle Cochrane Woods Memorial
1975.N-340

Flawless rendering and virtually invisible brushstrokes characterize the work of Photo-Realist artist Ralph Goings. He is interested in conveying a quintessentially American experience through the impersonal, mechanical image of the photograph as he paints "a facsimile of reality." The artist says that specific subjects are selected because of the visual qualities of the objects and their random informal arrangement. *Pie Case* is a still-life simulation of recognizable objects meticulously executed with oil paint on canvas.

Otis Kaye
1885-1974
DOLLAR BILL
n.d., etching with tempera
2 11/16 x 6 in.
NAA-Gift of Carl Rohman
1989.N-690

Otis Kaye, a Chicago engineer who pursued trompe l'œil money painting as a hobby, was aware of the work of his predecessors in this genre. Paper money was a favorite subject for American artists because it is flat and therefore ideal for still-life illusionary painting. Beginning in the mid-1880s, the U.S. Secret Service launched campaigns against the money painters, and many were pursuaded to desist. In 1909, Congress passed a law prohibiting all non-official copies of money, and as a result, Kaye neither sold nor exhibited his work, concealing his hand-drawn and colored bills even from his family.

Dennis Martin
1956-
EVENING SHOWER
1980, graphite
9 1/4 x 6 1/2 in.
UNL-F.M. Hall Collection
1981.H-2452

Working exclusively with pencil in the Photo-Realist manner, self-taught artist Dennis Martin has created a fascinating and thought-provoking image titled *Evening Shower*. Martin occasionally draws directly from life or from his imagination, but most often uses photographs as a reference, creating illusions of reality with a flawlessly accurate technique. His pencil is used delicately and patiently as textures in the drawing are built up gradually, layer upon layer.

Richard Newman
1948-
ECHOES OF AFFECTION
1994, stoneware clay, iron oxide pigment, alkyd resin, beeswax stain, 9 x 8 x 3 1/2 in.
UNL-Mercedes A. Augustine Aquisition Fund
1996.U-4644

Sculptor Richard Newman describes his work with this comment: "When we were both young, my baseball glove and I were practically inseparable. Now, as a full-time sculptor, I create leather-like illusions of these sensual, American icons in clay." Newman works with stoneware clay, creating a basic contour that is then carved, shaped and detailed to add the illusion of stitching, wrinkles, laces and knots. When the sculpture is dry, it is kiln fired and then stained to achieve the appearance of leather.

Charles Rain
1911-1985
NATURE MAGIC
1944, oil on panel
8 x 6 1/4 in.
UNL-Bequest of
the artist
1985.U-3821

Charles Rain
1911-1985
LICHEN
DOCUMENT
1944, oil on panel
8 1/4 x 6 1/4 in.
UNL-Bequest of
the artist
1985.U-3822

Charles Rain is considered a Magic Realist, one of a group of American artists who, in the 1940s, painted with extraordinary attention to realistic detail in the tradition of European trompe l'œil painting. The precisely rendered elements of a composition, however, were often placed in bizarre or dreamlike settings. Rain wrote, "I have worked very hard to refine my craft, but more importantly I have worked hardest at enhancing my ability to see and thereby express an inner vision."

At age twenty-one Charles Rain left the Art Institute of Chicago a confirmed abstractionist, a style of painting directly opposed to his mature work as a realist. His interest in art developed while he was a student at Lincoln High School, in Lincoln, Nebraska, where he excelled in art courses and was active in choral and drama groups. Later while living in Berlin and traveling to Paris and Vienna, Rain became converted to classicism as he studied the work of the great masters. His mastery of textures and trompe l'œil is apparent in the beautifully executed still lifes, *Nature Magic* and *Lichen Document*.

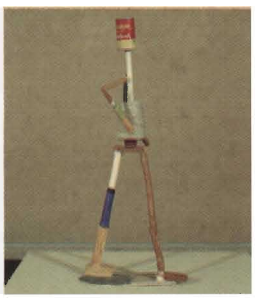
Robert
Rauschenberg
1925-
TAMPA CLAY
PIECE 3
1972, ceramic, luster
glaze, tape, soil patina
18 1/8 x 23 x 5 1/4 in.
UNL-Gift of Carl H.
and Jane Rohman
1994.U-4427

Severin Roesen
active: 1845-1872
STILL LIFE WITH
FRUIT AND CHAM-
PAGNE GLASS,
c.1857,
oil on canvas
29 1/4 x
36 1/4 in.
NAA-Gift of Carl
Rohman in
memory of Lorraine
LeMar Rohman
1988.N-686

Throughout his career, Robert Rauschenberg's art has included a wide range of media, reflecting the aesthetic complexities of the last half of the 20th century. Rauschenberg has challenged the restrictions of painting and sculpture with his belief that all life is open to art. *Tampa Clay Piece 3* reflects the artist's fascination with the thrown-away junk of an industrial society. Working skillfully with clay, he has created a trompe l'œil replica of a castoff corrugated packing box complete with printing, shipping labels and binding.

Around 1848, Severin Roesen came to this country from Germany, where he had been a painter of decorative designs on porcelain. After settling in New York, Roesen became active as one of the most accomplished and prolific still-life artists of the mid-19th century. He painted large, lush and elaborate fruit and floral compositions conveying the bountiful resources of America. Here, he depicts a profusion of fruits exhibited on a richly veined marble tabletop.

Paul Sarkisian
1928-
UNTITLED
1975, acrylic and
graphite on paper
28 x 36 in.
Nebraska Art
Association
Collection
1979.N-595



Richard Shaw
1941-
MRS. PARTCH
n.d., ceramic with un-
derglaze, glaze and
overglaze transfers
37 3/4 x 9 3/4 x
15 3/4 in.
Nebraska Art
Association Collection
1984.N-665

Paul Sarkisian's untitled work can be described as "magically illusionistic." Surely we are looking at real envelopes, showing evidence of human handling and held in place at the bottom of the frame by the glass covering. The trompe l'œil format employed by Sarkisian requires the representation of objects selected for their flatness. The artist's meticulously rendered representation of paper on paper fulfills his desire to make his paintings indistinguishable from the objects represented.

Mrs. Partch is the humorously appealing creation of California ceramic sculptor Richard Shaw. This lifelike stick-figure constructed of inanimate objects represents the artist's acknowledgment of both European ceramics and American 19th-century trompe l'œil painting traditions. At first glance, *Mrs. Partch* appears to be constructed of a tin can, a ball of twine, sticks and various racquet handles. Close observation reveals meticulously crafted porcelain, subjected to multiple firings and complex glazing. Shaw says he is always attracted to common objects, and it is "the idea of illusion" that he likes.

TROMPE L'OEIL: THE ART OF DECEPTION

1996-97 Sheldon Statewide Program Schedule

Chadron
August 26 - September 27, 1995, Memorial Hall Main Gallery
Local Sponsor: Chadron State College

North Platte
September 28 - October 25, 1996, The Mall
Local Sponsors: First Federal Lincoln, Herberger's Department Store; Joe Dye Ford, Lincoln, Mercury; North Platte Telegraph; Ross Perry's Crossroads Dodge; United Nebraska Bank; Western Nebraska National Bank

Grand Island
October 26 - November 22, 1996, Grand Island Public Library
Local Sponsors: Home Federal Savings & Loan, Grand Island Public School District, C.A.R.P., Community Arts Resource Personnel, Inc.

Holdrege
November 23, 1996 - January 3, 1997, Phelps County Museum
Local Sponsors: Dr. & Mrs. Stuart Embury, Dr. & Mrs. Wayne Quincy, Dr. & Mrs. Doak Doolittle, First National Bank of Holdrege, Holdrege School Foundation, National Art Honor Society, Holdrege Chapter

Aurora
January 4 - January 24, 1997, Plainsman Museum
Local Sponsor: Hamilton Community Foundation, Inc.

McCook
January 25 - February 21, 1997, Museum of the High Plains
Local Sponsors: AmFirst Bank, Beta Sigma Phi of McCook, Cornbelt Chemical Company, First National Bank, Howard Kool Motors, McCook National Bank, Inc., Marr Insurance, McCook Arts Council

Beatrice
February 22 - March 28, 1997, Gage County Historical Museum
Local Sponsor: Beatrice National Bank & Trust Co.

Columbus
March 30 - April 25, 1997, Columbus Art Gallery
Local Sponsors: Columbus Art Gallery, Columbus Area Arts Council, Columbus Public Schools

York
April 26 - May 29, 1997, First National Bank of York
Local Sponsor: First National Bank of York

Cozad
May 30 - June 27, 1997, Robert Henri Museum and Historical Walkway
Local Sponsors: Cozad Area Arts Council, Monroe Auto Equipment Co.

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