

William M. Hartnett

Out of the ashes and misery of the Great Irish Famine arose one of the nineteenth century's premier still life painters in the *trompe l'oeil* style, William M. Hartnett. Today, five of his painting are hanging in Gallery 224 of the American Wing at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Born in Clonakilty, County Cork in 1848, William Hartnett, his older brother, and his parents fled to America in 1849 and settled in Philadelphia . William's father, a shoemaker, and his mother, a seamstress, were working class Catholics in a largely Protestant patrician city. The Hartnett family grew to five children before tragedy struck in 1864: The father of this large family drowned in the Delaware River , leaving his wife to raise two teenaged boys and three daughters under the age of twelve.

William was apprenticed to an engraver and learned to work in steel, copper, silver and wood. Recognizing his emerging talent, he enrolled in evening classes in the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia . At age twenty, he moved to New York City and supported himself by engraving monograms and patterns on flatware, but William's goal was to paint full time. To that end, he took classes at Cooper Union and The National Academy of Design. At age twenty-six, Hartnett completed his first known oil painting entitled "Paint Tube and Grapes." Like his first painting, the bulk of Hartnett's *oeuvre* is still life paintings of objects; he just could not afford to hire live models and thus a career in still life was born. His skill with still life painting bringing quick success, William was, within a year, able to quit his engraving job and began a career as a full time artist.

After he returned briefly to Philadelphia to live with his mother and sister while taking additional classes at the Philadelphia Academy , Hartnett was able to launch successful exhibits in Philadelphia , New York , Louisville and Cincinnati . His paintings of smoking pipes and matches, letters and books were very popular with the public and would often be displayed in department stores, hotel lobbies and even in saloons where bets were made by saloon patrons as to which of the objects were painted and which were real! This trick of the eye is the essence of the *trompe d'oeil* style of painting. *Trompe d'oeil* paintings create such a strong illusion of reality that



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the viewer, on first sight, is in doubt as to whether the images are real objects or representations.

Harnett's expertise in *trompe d'oeil* inspired an entire American school of this style of painting in the later nineteenth century that continued into the nineteen twenties. There were many skilled practitioners in this style, but most critics agree that William Harnett was unsurpassed in his elegance of design and skill of execution.



At this time, however, critics were not enthralled. They dismissed his works as mechanical and uninspired. American museums were not inclined to purchase Harnett's *trompe d'oeil* paintings. He knew he had to exhibit in Europe if he wanted to gain respectability in the art world. By now at the age of thirty-two, he had earned enough money from sales of his art to travel to Europe .

For the next two years, he studied, traveled, and exhibited in Paris and London and then spent four more years in Munich . It was at this time that he expanded his repertoire, changing his subject matter to a more elegant and cultivated series of objects, adding antique brass and pottery, guns and musical instruments. These changes did not impress German art critics, nor did they win over the French critics when he exhibited in the Paris Salon. As in the past, it was the public, not the critics, which loved Harnett's creations.

Harnett returned to the United States when he was thirty-eight and settled in New York City . One amusing result of Harnett's ability to paint so realistically resulted from his painting of currency. In 1886, the New York police seized a painting of a five dollar bill from the wall of a saloon and arrested Harnett for counterfeiting. In dropping the charge, the presiding judge reprimanded him, saying, "The development and exercise of a talent so capable of mischief should not be encouraged." The law-abiding artist stopped painting currency, but a story spread that he once painted a stamp on an envelope and sent it successfully through the mail!



William Harnett's style of precise still life changed very little throughout his career. He believed that "new things do not paint well," preferring old and thoroughly masculine objects: thick, leather bound books, newspapers and pipes with embers still glowing in the bowl. He gained many clients who were attracted to his style. For example, one custom-made painting is entitled "Mr. Huling's Rack Picture," which is composed of Mr. Huling's personal and professional correspondence.

Nostalgia was in the air in Harnett's time. Reconstruction was over, leaving war wounds unhealed. The country's wealth was great in the Gilded Age, the period between 1865-1901, but morale was low. Americans yearned for a vanished time when life was simpler, a time evoked by quill pens, candles, and hand turned crockery, all of which were staples of Harnett's paintings.

His best known work, "After the Hunt" (1885), is an almost six feet tall arrangement of a battered old hat, a hunting horn, rifle, dead hare and birds and other objects nailed to a wooden door with brass hinges, burnished and mellowed by time. Harnett had high hopes that "After the Hunt," his greatest virtuoso effort, would guarantee his success abroad. In spite of its hanging on a Parisian salon wall, it did not sell, ending up on a New York City saloon wall where it caused a sensation.

A later work (1888), "Still Life- Violin and Music (Music and Good Luck)," is much more light-hearted and whimsical compared to "After the Hunt." Sociability is the theme and the objects evoke warmth and pleasure in modest leisure time. This painting captures the fad of the late nineteenth century when Americans were collecting old curiosities. Harnett, too, collected these objects- old books, weapons, pottery, musical instruments, and so on- which became studio props to be used repeatedly in his still life paintings.

In later years, Harnett enjoyed tremendous commercial success. His larger works now brought prices of several thousands of dollars, but recognition of the professional artistic community still eluded him. Unfortunately, it was at this time when his health declined precipitously. He suffered with kidney disease and severe rheumatism, making painting unbearable for months at a time. He sought relief in the waters at Carlsbad and Wiesbaden , Germany and later at Hot Springs , Arkansas . But he continued to worsen, was hospitalized several times, and finally, on October 27, 1892, he died in New York Hospital . He was only forty-four years old.



During William Harnett's seventeen year career, he had painted 250 precise still life paintings leading one obituary writer to note, "He copied in oil with the accuracy of a camera." Like his paintings, Harnett's life was simple and homey. He supported his mother until she died one year before his death. He was engaged but never married, owing to the health issues which led to his death. He worked long hours and lived modestly. He saw his life as a triumph of hard work over poverty. Ironically, even though William Harnett achieved financial success as an artist, his estate amounted to only \$2500.

The critics finally caught up with the public's appreciation of William Harnett's artistic skills when the Metropolitan Museum of Art mounted a retrospective of his work in spring 1992 on the 100th anniversary of his death. Finally, in the late 20th century this 19th century artist was recognized by the Establishment for his amazing technical skills and also for the hints of Surrealism and Cubism found in his work.

One of the paintings displayed in the Met exhibit, "Music and Literature," showing a stack of precariously piled books, a dismantled flute, a torn page from the score of *La Traviata* and a letter whose writing may have been smudged by tears, may suggest a despondent lover just departed. William Harnett had once stated that he wanted his paintings to tell a story, real or allegorical. His success is not only reflected in this work but it also gives us a glimpse into the brilliance of an artist who far exceeded the narrow bounds of "fooling the eye."

(Written by Anne Fitzgerald, September 2007)

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