Unraveling the Deception: *Trompe l'Oeil* as Guide to Charles Bird King's Picture Gallery, 1824-1861

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In June of 1824, American artist Charles Willson Peale visited Washington, DC, on business. Finding himself with free time, Peale, a man of prodigious energy and expansive interests, turned towards the studio of Charles Bird King. He later recounted in his autobiography that he "was much surprised to see so many Pictures, which testified the great industry of the Artist. [*sic*] for he had not only painted a great many portraits but also Landscapes, pieces of Still life and some imblematical [*sic*] subjects."[1]

Peale's remarks offer one of the earliest references to Charles Bird King's Gallery of Paintings, a for-profit picture gallery the artist maintained from 1824 to 1861.[2] During that period, King's gallery was the only cultural outlet of its kind in Washington. Though King was known primarily as a portraitist, Peale notes a large and widely varied collection of paintings, including landscapes, still lifes, and even "imblematical" subjects. Two of King's emblematical *trompe l'oeil* paintings functioned didactically as introductions and guides to the collection and to King's view of the importance of European stylistic tradition for the construction of American cultural identity.

The emblematic tradition had deep roots in American visual culture. Roger B. Stein has argued convincingly that Colonial Americans were conversant with emblematic visual tradition based on European prototypes, and he placed Peale, and in particular his late self-portrait *The Artist in his Museum* (1822), at the terminus of an overtly emblematic tradition in American art.[3] Though most American artists moved away from such imagery in the nineteenth century, this paper will argue that avoidance was by no means complete. King's gallery, and the *trompe l'oeil* paintings that encapsulated its message, were a countervailing trend to most nineteenth-century American artists' rhetorical propensity to dispose of European stylistic and symbolic tradition. The popularity of King's collection demonstrates that this imagery also continued to resonate with American popular culture through mid-century.

Charles Bird King came of age at a transitional moment in American political and cultural history (Figure 1). Born in 1785 in Newport, Rhode Island, King trained as a portraitist under a system grounded in craft tradition. After rudimentary instruction from a local Newport artist, King apprenticed for five years to Edward Savage, a portraitist and museum proprietor who had trained in London with Benjamin West. King moved to London in 1805 to study with West and at the Royal Academy, returning home at the end of 1811. At the time of his education, King was anything but an anomaly. Beginning with West's departure for Italy in 1760, nearly every American artist of ambition who could find the means had traveled to Europe for formal academic training.

Yet when King opened his gallery in 1824, European study was no longer a foregone conclusion for many American artists. Some artists and critics positioned the emerging landscape movement as an independent development that did not require —and indeed in some ways could be seen to be threatened by—European study. When American landscapist Thomas Cole embarked on a trip to Europe in 1829, the poet William Cullen Bryant pleaded that the artist not allow European splendors to dull his impression of American landscape:

> Gaze on them, till the tears shall dim thy sight,
> But keep that earlier, wilder image bright.[4]

Many years later the American genre painter William Sidney Mount expressed a sentiment that echoed Bryant's fear. Mount had never traveled to Europe for fear that he would dilute his American nationality:

> I have often been asked, "Have you been abroad?" A visit to Europe would be gratifying to me, but I have always had a desire to do something in art worthy of being remembered

[1] Charles Willson Peale, *The Autobiography of Charles Willson Peale*, ed. Lillian B. Miller, Sidney Hart, and Toby A. Appel, *The Selected Papers of Charles Willson Peale and His Family* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP for the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, 1983) 461.

[2] It is unclear precisely when King opened his Gallery of Paintings. The *National Intelligencer* first mentions the gallery in November, 1824. Charles Francis Adams records a visit to King's "painting rooms" in January 1824, in which he describes a number of works in the collection before entering the "painting room," where he watched the artist at work on a portrait. Charles Francis Adams, *Diary of Charles Francis Adams* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press for Harvard UP, 1964-1986) I: 47-48.

[3] Roger B. Stein, "Charles Willson Peale's Expressive Design: *The Artist in His Museum,*" in *New Perspectives on Charles Willson Peale: A 250th Anniversary Celebration,* ed. Lillian B. Miller and David C. Ward (Pittsburgh, PA: U of Pittsburgh P for the Smithsonian Institution, 1991) 204.

[4] William Cullen Bryant, *Poems by William Cullen Bryant. Collected and Arranged by the Author* (Philadelphia: A. Hart, 1853) 213.

> before leaving, for fear I might be induced by
> the splendor of European art to tarry too long,
> and thus lose my nationality.[5]

Mount was more concerned about the art than the landscape, but both authors pinpoint the desire to achieve an American uniqueness that Europe would threaten.[6]

At its opening in 1824, King's gallery stood in marked contrast to the emergent American visual rhetoric represented by the attitudes of Bryant and Mount, and it continued to do so through the mid-nineteenth century. In content, the gallery blended two popular exhibition strategies. King's primary business was portraiture, but while he hung many portraits, he did not focus exclusively on this genre. He also displayed a collection of plaster casts, as well as numerous copies after European masters and original genre, *trompe l'oeil*, and still life paintings that emphasized his European training. An 1842 description of the gallery counted over 250 paintings on display over two floors.[7] Through the comprehensiveness of the collection, King impressed upon his viewers the importance of educating themselves to the many historical styles of Western art, a task that, by viewing his collection in its entirety, could be performed over the course of an afternoon.

The contents of King's gallery are known today through contemporary partial descriptions as well as through the list of 204 paintings the artist left to the Redwood Library and Athenaeum in Newport, Rhode Island, at the end of his life.[8] This represented the vast majority of his collection. Of the paintings, ninety-three were subject pieces. They ranged from copies after Ostade, Raphael, and Sir Joshua Reynolds to original compositions such as *Rip van Winkle Returning from a Morning's Lounge* (*c*. 1825) and *The Itinerant Artist* (*c*. 1825). The visual complexity of King's exhibition space cut a wide swath through European art historical traditions. However, it was the Dutch tradition, both in style and content, which King privileged in his reproduction choices and which subsequently appeared in his original compositions. For every *Paris, Son of Priam, of Troy* (after a cast) or *Jeremiah* after Michelangelo, there were two versions of *"Way of the World"* and *The Love-Letter* based on European prints.

In her 1828 novel *What is Gentility? A Moral Tale* based in Washington, DC, Margaret Bayard Smith sends her young protagonists to "Mr. K—'s painting room," a loosely-veiled reference to King's Gallery of Paintings.[9] Upon their arrival, Lydia Tilton's dog Tippo becomes agitated at a painting of a cat in the window of the gallery. The incident introduces a conversation on the ancients and the story of Zeuxis and Parrhasius. The young men and woman's familiarity with the legends of ancient painters allows them to discuss with Mr. K—the various benefits of a "deception," as *trompe l'oeil* paintings at that time were known. First Tippo is deceived by the cat, then by a still life of "a market basket filled with provisions." In the latter case, he is enlightened only by approaching to smell the beef in the basket. The artist's response is to tell Tippo that he paid the painting "as great a compliment as the birds paid to the grapes of Zeuxis." Ultimately Lydia herself is deceived by a painting whose *trompe l'oeil* curtain covers a portion of the composition; she "start[s] back" in amazement when she recognizes the deception.

Smith's novel explores the ennobling potential of education and the fine arts. For her scene inside an artist's studio/gallery, Smith naturally turned to Charles Bird King, the only local example and a personal friend. Considering their relationship, Smith's focus on King's deceptions rather than on his portraits or subject paintings suggests the importance of the genre to the artist and likely reflects his own attitudes towards their purpose. In the story of Zeuxis and Parrhasius, the two ancient Greek artists who competed to create the most realistic image of nature in a painting,[10] the illusionism of Zeuxis' painted grapes induced birds to peck at the canvas. Not to be outdone, Parrhasius created a composition with a painted curtain, which Zeuxis attempted to remove. Realizing the deception, Zeuxis declared his opponent the winner for having deceived a true connoisseur—an artist—whereas he himself had only deceived a bird. In Smith's retelling, Tippo and Lydia both pay the artist a compliment

[5] Quoted in Albert Frankenstein, *William Sidney Mount* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1975) 49.

[6] On another occasion Mount wrote that European training—and in particular the grand manner style advocated by eighteenth-century British portraitist Sir Joshua Reynolds—distracted the painter from what should be his primary focus, Nature: "There has been enough written on ideality—and the grand style of Art etc.—to divert the artist from the study of natural objects. For ever after, let me read the volume of nature—a lecture always ready and bound by the Almighty." Diary entry dated August 19, 1846. Quoted in Frankenstein, 143.

[7] George Watterston, *A New Guide to Washington* (Washington: Robert Farnham; New York: Samuel Colman, 1842) 102-103.

[8] Handwritten accession records are on file at the Redwood Library and Athenaeum. The list was included as well in Redwood Library and Athenaeum, *Catalogue of Pictures, Statuary, &c., belonging to The Redwood Library, September 1, 1885* (Newport, RI, 1885).

[9] Mrs. Smith refers to the American President's wife as Mrs. M–d–n (Dolly Madison). For the passage at Mr. K–'s painting room, see Margaret Bayard Smith, *What is Gentility? A Moral Tale* (Washington, DC: P. Thompson, 1828) 183-88.

[10] Pliny, *Natural History*, Book 35, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1952) 309-11.

[11] Charles Francis Adams recorded a similar visit to King's gallery in his diary. After his first visit to King's gallery, in January 1824, Adams described the contents of the collection. After commenting on a variety of portraits and some "sweet fruit pieces," Adams commented: "Some voluptuous pieces also which it would not do to notice before ladies. One in particular which appeared to be Joseph and the wife of Potipher although we could not see for a veil which John and myself attempted to raise, when we discovered the deception." Adams I: 48.

by mistaking paintings for reality. Yet, Lydia's reaction of amazement is the larger accolade, particularly because she herself is an amateur artist.[11]

At the moment she realizes the deception, Lydia becomes an active viewer rather than a passive observer. Art historian Wendy Bellion has argued that *trompe l'oeil* requires collusion between the artist and his audience. For a "deception" to work, the viewer must allow him or herself to be deceived while simultaneously recognizing the artist's role in creating the deception.[12] This mechanism of the painting activates a relationship between the artist and viewer. He or she cannot passively receive the content of the work of art but must respond to it by choosing to continue the deception or by refusing it entirely. King exploited *trompe l'oeil*—the only medium that compelled his audience's interaction—to justify the relevance of his own European training, as well as European tradition more generally, to an American audience.

Two paintings that hung in King's gallery over the majority of its existence took advantage of the *trompe l'oei*l paradigm to engage the viewer in the gallery's didactic program. King produced *Poor Artist's Cupboard* in 1815 (Figure 2) soon after his return from London and a decade before he opened his gallery of paintings. The artist depicts a carefully-stacked collection of books inside a niche, with two well-worn volumes open to the viewer at the front—*Advantages of Poverty: Third Part* and *Pleasures of Hope*. A conch shell rests above the stacked books, boxed drafting tools sit at the center of the composition, a rolled-up canvas cuts across the space diagonally, and a portfolio exposes the edges of the sketches it houses just beneath a large volume titled *Lives of the Artists*. Not only the *vanitas* theme but also the separate elements of the conch shell, a glass of water, and large piece of bread and knife atop a Delft-style plate unify the composition within the pattern of Dutch tradition.

Poor Artist's Cupboard is the first iteration on a theme to which King returned several times in his career.[13] The paintings explore the artist's status in American society from an ironic, autobiographical perspective. Both *Poor Artist's Cupboard* and the 1830 *Vanity of the Artist's Dream* (Figure 3) display an artist's tools and book collection, surely based on King's own possessions. Internal evidence suggests that King created *Vanity* as a continuation in a series and not as a completely independent work, but by that time the books had aged and the artist's "cupboard" had become increasingly cluttered. While some elements of the paintings—such as the books, some of which have fictional titles—are surely imagined, other objects must have been King's own. The drafting tools that King places at the center of both paintings are identical, and both the porte-crayon and sketchbook in *Vanity* appear in self-portraits of the artist. The later painting appears to have been commissioned and likely never hung in King's gallery,[14] but the references (perhaps clear only to him) from one painting to the next indicate his investment in the trope of the struggling artist and in self-expression through its means.

Poor Artist's Cupboard and *Vanity* blend fiction and reality convincingly yet ironically. Charles Bird King was never an impoverished artist; he was a successful portraitist of independent means. He did travel as an itinerant artist in search of sitters in the years after he returned to the United States, but he was not alone—even the most successful portraitist of the early nineteenth century, Gilbert Stuart, traveled to Washington in 1803 in search of new commissions. Indeed, in a romantic self-portrait of approximately the same date as *Poor Artist's Cupboard*, King portrays himself as a well-dressed young man. Though its date confirms that King did not produce *Poor Artist's Cupboard* specifically for his gallery, it served an important purpose in that space. Visitors would have recognized the dissonance between the artist's circumstances—after all, they were standing in his finely-appointed gallery—and those depicted in the painting. This would have led them into an engagement with the work that highlighted the elements of King's profession that he considered important—training in draftsmanship, extensive reading and knowledge of tradition, and the importance of European precedents.

The many similarities between the paintings highlight two messages: the poverty of artistic patronage (and consequently, of artists as well), and the importance of European study for artists and patrons alike. King elevates the former issue to primary importance textually as well as visually. Both paintings present themselves to the viewer as catalogues of the artist's effects, introduced and reinforced by the "Sheriff's Sale" clippings at upper left. The clipping from *Poor Artist's Cupboard* reads in part:

> The Property of an Artist
> Consisting of one candle, one Blanket, Two pair of Ruffles, Peticoat,
> Silk Stockings, and Peck of Potatoes

12 Wendy Bellion, "Likeness and Deception in Early American Art," diss., Northwestern, 2001, 16.

13 There are two extant paintings on this subject: *Poor Artist's Cupboard* (*c*. 1815) in the Corcoran Museum of Art collection and *Vanity of the Artist's Dream* (1830) in the Fogg Art Museum. King exhibited *vanitas* paintings outside his own gallery periodically over his career. He sold *Still Life. The property of a poor Artist* to the Apollo Association in 1839, which raffled the painting to Mr. Albert Christie of New York that year; he exhibited *The Poor Artist's Closet* at the Boston Athenaeum in 1828; he subsequently exhibited a *vanitas* again at the Boston Athenaeum in 1832, titled *Poor Artist's Study,* owned by J. Fullerton. Fullerton's name appears on the face of *Vanity of the Artist's Dream*. Finally, he bequeathed *Poor Artist's Closet; or Sale of Artist's Effects* to the Redwood Library in 1862. The Redwood Library subsequently deaccessioned that work, which could be the painting in the Corcoran today. The Corcoran painting could as well be the painting auctioned to Mr. Christie by the Apollo Association in 1839; or, the painting King gave the Redwood could be a fourth, unlocated, painting.

14 For *Vanity of the Artist's Dream* provenance information, see footnote 13 above.

> Four Pictures, of Roast Pigs, Turkies,
> Decanters of Wine, and Plumb Cake
> Painted from Recollection….

Comparison with an 1823 *National Intelligencer* newspaper advertisement for a Sheriff's sale highlights the poverty of King's fictional artist. After stating that the defaulter, a John Perkins, has land holdings of 580 acres in different parts of Prince George's County, Maryland, the advertisement continues:

> The improvements are an excellent large frame dwelling house, tobacco houses, stabling, and a good well of water in the yard. The land will be sold with or without the crop, as may suit the purchaser.[15]

The comparatively few possessions of the artist—no land, no home, no furnishings beyond a candle—are striking. King humorously drives the final nail into his fictive poverty by stating that he painted still lifes "from recollection," presumably because he could not afford to eat.

Another *trompe l'oeil* painting that hung in King's gallery claimed quite literally to be a guide to the exhibitions. *Catalogue—a Deception* (1828, Figure 4) represents a European-inspired ideal landscape with crumbling ruins in the background and a blasted tree trunk in the foreground. These evocations of the sublime serve as scenic backdrop to a disintegrating "Descriptive Catalogue of the Pictures in King's Exhibition" dated 1828. Compositionally and symbolically, the ruined building and ruined catalogue echo one another. The landscape must have shared similarities with many of the European copies in King's collection; the painting, then, presents a guide to the collection through its compositional structure in addition to the catalogue deception. The catalogue cues the viewer that the work itself contains a clue to the make-up of the collection and the stylistic vocabulary he or she needed to decode it. Further complicating the composition, the catalogue cleverly masks the suggestive encounter between a seated woman and a kneeling young man. We see the naked legs and gesturing hand of the woman, and the rolled-up pants leg of the man, who lean towards one another. King invites his audience to imagine the couple's interaction, hidden discreetly behind the catalogue, perhaps considering at the same time that the other paintings in the collection will reward close scrutiny and active engagement.

King did not capriciously depict this clearly European-inspired landscape composition as the backdrop for the catalogue to his collection. It is a signpost to the visitor pointing to the importance of European stylistic conventions for the understanding of the collection, both American themes and copies after European masters. Indeed the very absence of blasted trees and crumbling ruins from King's landscapes of Harper's Ferry[16] —sublimely peaceful, sun-bathed scenes of ferry workers and leisure fishermen—offer a symbolically-loaded reference to the peace, prosperity and health of the young nation where all of nature is in alignment.

To return to *Poor Artist's Cupboard,* the same emphasis on European tradition, and on rigorous training appear more broadly at the forefront. In both this painting and *Vanity,* King placed draftsman's tools at the center of the composition. In the former painting there are no brushes, and the palette is far to the back of the niche, barely visible at the left. Between the drafting tools, the books, and the prints, King makes a strong statement for the importance of tradition and of rigorous training—mirroring his own path to success and a regimen that few artists who came of age during and after the War of 1812 could rival. Furthermore, he emphasized in this painting the importance of training in emblems for both artist and patron. The conch shell, the knife, bread, Delft-style plate, and glass of water are all traditional symbols from seventeenth-century Dutch art.

The emblematic tradition did not die with the Early Republic. Political and intellectual foci shifted, but the symbolic power of images did not wane. King's success reflected the viewing and collecting interests of his patrons. Exhibition records for the Apollo Association and Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts reveal that European originals and copies and American subjects within the Dutch pictorial mode remained important into the 1840s. King exhibited *Grandfather's Hobby* (Figure 5), a genre study of a young boy pretending to be his grandfather —sitting in his armchair, wearing his spectacles and tricorn hat, holding his cane, and reading the newspaper—at the Apollo Association four times between 1838 and 1839. The hobby horse hanging from the arm of the chair is a light visual-verbal pun, while the child himself evokes the passage of time and the fleeting moment of youth. The editors of the 1830 Christmas gift annual *The Token* reinforced the emblematic message through a poem that appeared alongside an engraving after the painting. The poem describes the young boy's feeling of elation to have taken his grandfather's chair, "deem[ing] himself in boyish glory,/ Like the old man that told the story!"[17]

William Sidney Mount's career reinforces the point that symbolic content never faded from the American visual vocabulary, though it did shift towards a more subtle evocation. A comparison of Mount's *Farmer's Bargaining* (1835, Figure 6) with King's *Interior of a Ropewalk* (*c*. 1840, Figure

[15] *National Intelligencer* [Washington] 4 Sept. 1823.

[16] For reproductions of *Harper's Ferry, Government Work Lock on the Potomac* (*c*. 1815-1820) and *Harper's Ferry, Looking Upstream* (*c*. 1815-1820) see Andrew F. Cosentino, *The Paintings of Charles Bird King (1787-1862)* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1977) Figures 99 and 100.

[17] *The Token* engraved Thomas Sully's copy after King's original work. *The Token; A Christmas and New Year's Present* (Boston, 1830) 233-34.

[18] Elizabeth Johns, *American Genre Painting: The Politics of Everyday Life* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale UP, 1991) 31.

7) emphasizes the distinction. King's painting overtly employs European emblematic language in the inclusion of a child playing on a set of scales, whereas Mount hints that the two individuals are about to make a deal through the gesture of the older whittling farmer, who is "coming to a point."[18] The gallery's frequent inclusion as a tourist attraction in guidebooks and on maps from the 1840s onward, despite the outmoded visual language King employed, testifies to its continued popularity with the American public.

Did King's gallery help to formulate or merely reflect trends in American visual culture? The reality probably lies somewhere in between. He certainly did not initiate a collecting interest in Old Master paintings, but he was at the forefront of the emerging genre tradition in the 1820s, and his Dutch-inspired works reinforced the importance of that visual language. By drawing the viewer into communication with the objects and their maker, *Poor Artist's Cupboard* and *Landscape with Catalogue* helped to interpret the nature of the relationship between an American and a European visual language. Expanding this visual conversation to the collection at large not only educated King's visitors to European tradition, but also helped them to experience American culture through the means of its symbolic visual vocabulary.

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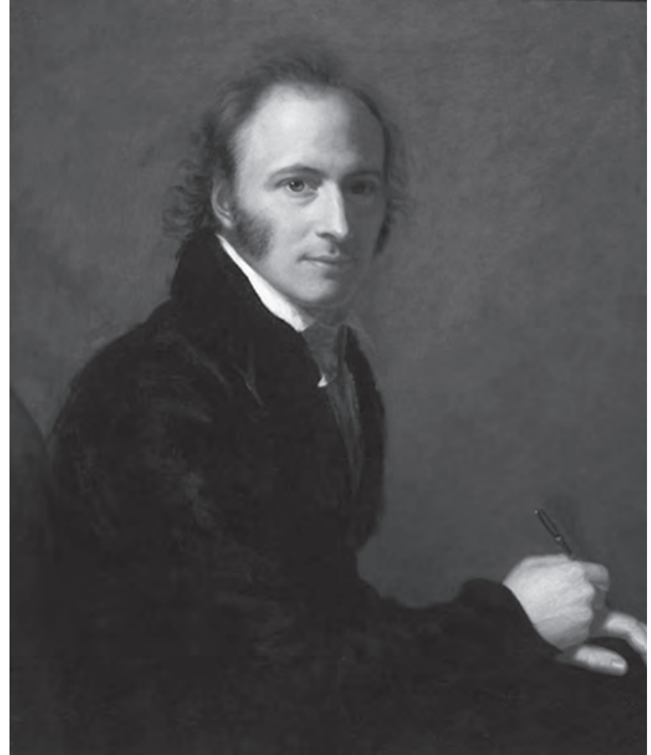

Figure 1. Charles Bird King, *Self-portrait at 30, c.* 1815, bequest of the Artist. Courtesy of the Redwood Library and Athenaeum, Newport, Rhode Island.

Figure 2. Charles Bird King, *Poor Artist's Cupboard,* 1815, oil on panel, 29 ¾ x 27 ¾ inches. Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. Museum Purchase, Gallery Fund and Exchange, 55.93.

[*left*] Figure 3. Charles Bird King, *The Vanity of the Artist's Dream,* 1830, oil on canvas, 35 1/8 x 29 ½ inches, Harvard University Art Museums, Fogg Art Museum. Gift of Grenville L. Winthrop, Class of 1886, 1942.193. Photo credit: Imaging Department © President and Fellows of Harvard College.

[*lower left*] Figure 4. Charles Bird King, *Landscape with Catalogue*, 1828, oil on canvas, gift of the Artist. Courtesy of the Redwood Library and Athenaeum, Newport, Rhode Island.

[*lower right*] Figure 5. Charles Bird King, *Grandfather's Hobby,* 1820-1825, oil on canvas, 35.9 x 28 inches. Courtesy of Winterthur, bequest of Mrs. Waldon Phoenix Belknap.

Figure 6. William Sidney Mount, *Farmer's Bargaining,* 1835, oil on canvas, frame: 41 ½ x 35 ½ inches, The Stuart Collection, on permanent loan from The New York Public Library, accession number S-14. Collection of the New-York Historical Society.

Figure 7. Charles Bird King, *Interior of a Ropewalk,* 1845, oil on canvas, 39 x 54 ¼ inches, University of Virginia Art Museum. Museum Purchase, 197.10.