Show and Tell:  
Representation, Communication, and the Still Lifes of William M. Harnett

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ABSTRACT

William Harnett is best known for his highly realistic paintings of inanimate objects like an aged edition of *Don Quixote* and a Colt .44 revolver. The imperceptible brushwork with which he depicted these subjects has prompted scholars to categorize his paintings as works of trompe l’oeil that trained viewers to see through the deceptions of modern American life. But Harnett’s output was incredibly diverse and readily divides into relatively distinct periods based on the successive subjects that he took up and the compositional adjustments that accompanied them. I analyze these phases in conjunction with period discourses about how objects were made and used in order to understand what it meant to make a *painting*—a still life—of things like texts and tools in late-nineteenth-century America. Ultimately, I argue that Harnett investigated how these objects signify and adopted their rhetorical and technical strategies such that the visible and material properties of his paintings (like those of his subjects) were inscribed with and represented the mind at work.

In the first chapter, I analyze Harnett’s early drawings (a sketchbook of ornamental designs as well as individual cast studies) in light of practices in the silver industry and the art academy to argue that the artist approached drawing as a means to analyze—to deconstruct and reconstruct—how works of art, broadly conceived, were made. The second chapter looks at Harnett’s earliest paintings (horizontal tabletop still lifes of objects associated with sociability and vertical works of dead animals and, at times, hunting equipment against wooden planks) in conjunction with the pictorial models that would have been available to him in the United States and Europe, respectively, when he made them. I contend that Harnett increasingly treated the canvas as a physical surface to be inscribed with language-like quantities such that his paintings would exploit—rather than ineffectively deny—its status as a flat, immobile plane. My third
chapter focuses on Harnett’s paintings of functional objects accompanied by illegible newspaper clippings and draws on writings about man-made things to argue that the labor-intensive technique by which he displayed and depicted a gun, pipe, and horseshoe in these works invested the actual act of painting and, as a result, his canvases with his own subjectivity. In the last chapter, I analyze Harnett’s late paintings of explicitly domestic settings filled with musical, literary, and decorative arts along with various uses of composition at the time to argue that conceiving these works was a means to reason between, as well as for, the artist and the viewer.

Over the course of his brief, but prolific twenty-six-year career, then, Harnett introduced manual and linguistic strategies into his work such that his materials and process were exploited to represent the cognitive operations by which his ostensible subjects were depicted. As such, his work challenged the illustrative bent of mid-century American painting and obviates the false dichotomy between “illusionism” and “realism” ascribed to the work that followed it. Harnett’s paintings and project as well as the ways in which they intersect with practices in numerous other fields suggest that these terms and the works categorized by them have less to do with what a painting looked like than how it was made and the cognitive implications of that process for artist and viewer alike. Harnett thus participates in, and reveals, the epistemological concerns that pervaded the culture of objects, including painting, in late-nineteenth-century America.
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INTRODUCTION

“The artist shows the highest skill in the representation of textures. The wood is wood, the iron is iron, the brass is brass, the leather is leather. The fur of the rabbit and the feathers of the birds tempt the hand to feel their delicate softness.”¹ That is how one contemporary critic described After the Hunt (fig. 1), a mid-career painting by William M. Harnett, in an article published upon its exhibition at Theodore Stewart’s Warren Street Saloon in New York. The painting, of which four versions exist, pictures an assortment of hunting equipment—from a rifle to a knife, a trumpet to a powder horn—as well as the animals that it was used to capture. Yet, the commentator is less interested in the specific things in the picture than in how Harnett has depicted them, in the fact that they look so true to life. This observation and others like it, as well as the hyperbolic accounts of people actually following through on the kind of temptation the critic describes and attempting to touch the objects in Harnett’s paintings, has led his work to be designated trompe l’oeil. Be they of animals or of books pictured within shallow spaces or against a flat plane, the paintings have been understood as an attempt to “trick the eye” of the viewer into thinking that the objects within them are real. As “illusions,” the works have been explained by more recent commentators by recourse to the economic and social conditions in which they were made: a burgeoning consumer society in which men and women were deceived by the commodities around them. In this context, paintings like Harnett’s are understood by scholars to employ a similarly seductive strategy so as to train the viewer to see through it. They

were painted in a hyper-realistic, even illusionistic, style in order to elicit as well as undermine the kind of desire described by the commentator above.  

These interpretations account for an incredibly salient aspect of Harnett’s work: that it so actively and unapologetically confronts its viewers and that it does so in a way that actually impacts how those viewers think. But, one wonders why Harnett would be interested in this kind of public service, and why he would adopt painting as his tool in the interest of it. Further, as much as his style can (and should) be theorized in light of contemporaneous social concerns, it is also very much a pictorial convention and art historical tradition; that is to say, even if it is understood as trompe l’oeil, this style has historical precedent (going back to seventeenth-century Holland and even ancient Greece) in light of which Harnett’s resurrection of it in late-nineteenth-century America need be considered. This project asks what it means for Harnett to make paintings that replicate the textures of a diverse array of objects: how were the subjects that he took up understood at the time? How was style itself understood? How and why would it become possible to make paintings that so faithfully reproduce such quotidian things? I do not want to deny that the objects in the paintings are incredibly realistic, but to explore the significance of this veracity within the broader context of the paintings (what they represent and how those things are shown) as well as Harnett’s professional experiences as an artist and the culture in which they (Harnett and his paintings) participated. For, despite the meticulous technique that Harnett employed for at least a decade of his twenty-six-year career, if not longer,

2 The following sources are the most prominent and fruitful examples of this approach to Harnett’s work: Michael Leja, “Touching Pictures by William Harnett,” in Looking Askance: Skepticism and American Art from Eakins to Duchamp (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2004) and David M. Lubin, “Masculinity, Nostalgia, and the Trompe l’Oeil Still-Life Paintings of William Harnett,” in Picturing a Nation: Art and Social Change in Nineteenth-Century America (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994). Both Leja and Lubin are interested in how and why late-nineteenth-century viewers responded to Harnett’s paintings and, thus, interpret them in light of broader social concerns. By contrast, but also by extension, this dissertation explores how and why the paintings were made. I look at the pictorial concerns exhibited by the works and the visual, material, and literary culture of which they were a part and with which they intersect to theorize the imperatives behind Harnett’s project. I argue that he was interested in how and what a painting could communicate and, ultimately, even why it should.
his subject matter changed markedly and, I would argue, systematically over this time. In fact, it proceeded through four clear, if not wholly exclusive, phases as Harnett took up literary subjects and then animate ones, practical devices and then cultural ones. Each chapter of this dissertation addresses one of these phases/subjects as well as the professional circumstances that (to an extent) helped proscribe them and the aspect of painting (both as a process and as an object) that they explore. Rather than illusions or deceptions, it approaches the paintings as still lifes in order to understand what they mean as well as how they mean and why that matters in the context of late-nineteenth-century American art.\(^3\) In fact, I contend that the paintings themselves are concerned with these very same questions: with how meaning is made and circulates, and how painting does and does not engage in this process.

Harnett and, more accurately, his paintings are interested in how art and knowledge are produced and the extent to which these practices are synonymous or at least concomitant. Over the course of his career, he explored different facets of painting as a physical thing developed from “parts”—from subject matter to the canvas to style and composition—in ways that attempted to mobilize (rather than overcome) its material and visual properties as well as exploit their potential to serve as a means of communication. His work sought to embrace rather than challenge those qualities (like the planarity and stillness of the picture plane) that impeded painting’s ability to provide an effective or at least comprehensive illustration of the visible and natural world such that they were able to depict the way knowledge was gleaned from it.

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\(^3\) In his 1995 dissertation, *Meaning of the Art of William M. Harnett*, Chad Mandeles also addresses the artist’s subject matter in order to explore what the paintings actually mean; invoking Harnett’s desire to have his compositions “tell a story,” Mandeles looks to the objects in the paintings as keys to their narrative content. He adopts a roughly iconographic approach that interprets the works as allegories about life and death and related vanitas concerns. In this dissertation, based on analysis of the paintings and research into the culture in which they were produced, I contend that Harnett used objects and strategies that would enable meaning to be inscribed into the very form and matter of the paintings such that they themselves, as material things, communicated in language-like ways. As such, Harnett’s project actually posed a direct challenge to the kind of allegorical and narrative work that Mandeles understands his paintings to be.
Ironically, these efforts often entailed or exhibited strategies resonant with writing and text and how they were taught, used, composed, and understood at the time. In the multiple fields associated with rhetoric, writing and text were a means to make thinking visible. Yet, this concern was also shared by a broad swathe of other disciplines that emerged or radically transformed at this time and, in often unexpected ways, intersected with the objects and practices that Harnett would employ. His approach to things like composition and even the material handling of paint is not unlike techniques seen in the decorative arts as well as ethnographic museums—techniques that were invested in means by which humanity could be put on display or that enabled man-made things to reveal the thinking required to produce them. As Harnett’s work progressively assumed both the strategies of writing as well as the aesthetics of text, then, it also came to index and represent his own mind at work. The paintings thus not only pictured, but embodied, the intellectual and technical strategies by which they themselves were made; like the objects within them—things like novels and scores, but also pipes and vases—they became media by which cognition could be made material or concrete. As such, Harnett’s work not only participates in, but actually exposes the epistemological concerns that pervaded late-nineteenth-century American culture as well as the very place of painting within it.

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Almost no written documents about Harnett or his work survive from his lifetime. If he kept a diary or a journal, sent letters or received any, none of them are known today. A select few materials by friends and colleagues do exist, however, and they can be parsed to provide insight into the facts of the artist’s life as well as the ways in which he worked. Harnett’s friend and one-
time colleague, William Ignatius Blemly, compiled a scrapbook about the artist; the smartly bound volume is filled with newspaper clippings about Harnett, some silverware designs, casual drawings, and ephemera (like bills of travel) that must have been supplied by the artist and that provide some rare insight into the facts of his life. A single interview with Harnett exists; it was printed in News—a publication that no longer exists and whose back catalogue could not be located by this scholar or others before her. We know it from a clipping fortuitously contained within the aforementioned scrapbook. In 1893, the year after Harnett died at the young age of forty-four of rheumatism, Thomas Birch & Sons, auctioneers, published a catalogue of the artist’s estate in advance of their sale of its contents. The catalogue provides a detailed inventory of the paintings, drawings, and models contained within the artist’s studio at his death. In addition to these materials, there are, of course, reviews in the popular and professional press.

But almost nothing is known about the artist himself and, if certain facts are known, they have made their way down to us by way of lore that often cannot be corroborated. Harnett was born in 1848 in Clonakilty in County Cork, Ireland, and his family (parents and three sisters) emigrated to Philadelphia the following year. In his late teens and early twenties, he is said to have worked as a silver engraver and definitely took classes at art academies in New York and Philadelphia, whose records substantiate this fact. Harnett spent the early 1880s in Europe (Frankfurt, Munich, Paris, and London), although the precise dates of his travels as well as what

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6 Thomas Birch’s Sons, *Executrix’s Sale; Catalogue of Exquisite Examples in Still Life being Oil Paintings by the Late William Michael Harnett, including the Furnishings of His Studio* (Philadelphia: Thomas Birch’s Sons, 1893).

he was doing there remain unknown. In 1886, he is thought to have returned to the States, specifically New York, where he lived and worked until 1892, when he passed away from rheumatism.

Amidst all this uncertainty, the paintings themselves stand as the surest fact and, more importantly, the clearest statement of Harnett’s interests—though they, too, have been subject to claims of inauthenticity. By that I mean, despite the fact that the artist himself left no documents that attest to his artistic imperatives (which may explain in part why his paintings have not been considered from this perspective) the paintings quite unmistakably attest to his interests.

Previous work on Harnett or, more accurately, his paintings has almost entirely neglected his investment and even role in creating them. This dissertation analyzes the paintings in order to interpret what his artistic (versus personal) investment in them might have been as well as the meager albeit important biographical facts we know about Harnett so as to understand the pictorial options available to him and what it would mean for him to opt for the subjects and strategies that he chose to pursue. As such, it does not claim that Harnett initiated his career with an ultimate goal or intention in mind, which was pursued by way of a pre-determined path, but, rather, to assert his awareness and consciousness of pictorial conventions, their possibilities, and limitations as well as his agency in manipulating and transforming them. It understands his oeuvre as a self-conscious project about painting—one significantly distinguished, at least within

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8 In the late 1940s, when Alfred Frankenstein began compiling his biography of William Harnett and catalogue of the artist’s work, he came to suspect that many of the paintings attributed to Harnett were by a different hand. In consultation with conservators, a handwriting expert, art historians, and museum professionals, Frankenstein asserted that those works were, in fact, by Harnett’s contemporary John F. Peto and insinuated that Edith Halpert of the Downtown Gallery, who had been responsible for Harnett’s rediscovery, had forged the artist’s signature in order to bolster the appeal and price of the still lifes in her possession. The controversy is addressed by Frankenstein in his introduction to After the Hunt and summarized by Elizabeth Johns in “Harnett Enters Art History,” her contribution to the William M. Harnett exhibition catalogue.

9 This discussion draws on the ongoing art historical conversation about intentionality conducted, among other places, in issue #6 of nonsite.org as well as the suite of Interventions essay in The Art Bulletin Vol. 88, No. 1 (March, 2006) around Alexander Nemerov’s “The Boy in Bed: Scenes of Reading in N.C. Wyeth’s Wreck of the ‘Covenant.”
the late-nineteenth-century, by its recourse to historical models as well as literary and material culture to test and challenge the physical and conceptual boundaries of the medium. This dissertation thereby reconstructs the ideas associated with the kinds of subjects and strategies that Harnett employed and suggests that—by way of his academic training and professional experiences—the decisions that he made and the way his oeuvre developed reveal an interest in challenging the narrative bent of mid-century painting and investing the physical act of painting and, thus, the material qualities of his work with the ability to record the workings of the mind, as writing and texts were seen to do at the time.

As such, this project makes recourse to the texts and images in which the objects that Harnett depicted were used, discussed, and pictured so as to understand what it meant for them to be presented and represented as they are in Harnett’s paintings. These discourses come from a broad range of disciplines—from the humanities to the sciences to the social sciences—that resonate with specific aspects of the paintings and often put into words, or underscore, the significance behind his pictorial strategies. Harnett’s paintings thereby emerge as of-a-piece with the broader culture of objects of which they are a part and his pictorial strategies as semi-linguistic ones like those employed in the visual and literary culture of his day.

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A few notes on both the evidence included in this account and the way that it is presented in the body of the text. This project draws on information, discourses, and images from a wide variety of disciplines—from design and the decorative arts to anatomy and geology, from paintings to photographs and prints, from anthropology exhibits to museum history, economic
treatises and psychological theories to manuals about reading, writing, and even speaking. These materials were selected because they shared concerns or strategies with aspects of Harnett’s paintings; for example, in attempting to decipher what it meant to put a used object on display, anthropology presented itself as a natural interlocutor; in order to understand how a young Harnett may have conceived of the body he was asked to depict in art classes, anatomy was a logical resource. I do not mean to suggest that Harnett read the precise sources introduced, but that the authors of them articulate in words the ideas and assumptions that Harnett’s work manifests in paint. By no means are they the result of exhaustive research into late-nineteenth-century American culture, but, rather, selections targeted on the basis of identifiable aspects of the paintings, which become a new lens onto how things like language and knowledge as well as art were understood at the time. Additionally, while secondary sources were always consulted (even if the extent of them was somewhat limited in many cases) I have chosen to analyze all the contemporaneous discourses and images invoked directly. I was interested in the language used, the ideas expressed, as well as the assumptions ingrained within them and in what such rich, but often largely untapped texts and pictures could reveal about how the men (and women) of Harnett’s day thought about things like the body and the mind, nature, display and civilization, but also discourse and representation as practices themselves. Often these discourses and my analysis of them are given as much time and space in the text as my discussion of Harnett’s work; the voices of their authors are foregrounded in an attempt to immerse the reader not just in Harnett’s work, but in his entire world—into the kinds of texts, pictures and ideas in circulation and into how they circulated. This roughly curatorial approach seeks to reveal the full extent to which Harnett’s artistic strategies and concerns were of-a-piece with the cultural developments
of his day and, so, how such developments share in the development of contemporary (or contemporaneous) art.

That said, there is much that has not been included in this study. I focus on dominant trends and patterns in Harnett’s oeuvre and, as such, some popular yet anomalous works have not been addressed; these omissions include *Attention, Company!*, 1878, the artist’s only surviving figurative painting in a public collection; his two-letter rack paintings, *The Artist’s Letter Rack*, 1879, and *Mr. Hulings’ Rack Picture*, 1888; his rare shinplaster works, *Still Life—Five Dollar Bill*, 1877, *Shinplaster with Exhibition Label*, 1879, and *Still Life—Ten Cent Bill*, 1879; *Job Lot Cheap*, 1878; his one drawing of a live figure, *Profile Portrait of a Girl*, 1881; and the tabletop still lifes he pursued in Europe, works like *Munich Still Life*, 1882, which—like the game paintings he made at that time—also witnessed the introduction of organic subject matter, albeit less prominently. These works certainly explore the themes and ideas that are exhibited by the paintings that I do discuss, but a thorough interpretation of them would raise more—albeit related—questions than can be addressed here. There are also entire concerns that pervaded the late-nineteenth-century that only figure into this study rather tangentially, such as religious belief and political debate, to cite the two most prominent examples. These subjects were certainly related to practices like reading, but introduce issues that are only peripherally relevant to what I want to say about the paintings. In other cases, it is possible that the discourses that are invoked and analyzed could have been joined or maybe even replaced by others as interlocutors with Harnett’s work; for example, the strong formal similarities between the relief sculptures of both Thomas Eakins and, most especially, Augustus St. Gaudens and Harnett’s paintings could serve the discussion of materiality in chapter 3; and, likewise, Harnett’s game paintings might benefit
from comparison to the prints of very similar subjects that often hung in dining rooms in the United States at the time that those paintings were made.

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The wood, iron, brass, leather, fur and feathers in the After the Hunts as well as many of Harnett’s other paintings truly are as vivid as the author of “Queer Art Illusions: Some of the Many Methods Employed to Produce Them” described them to be over a century ago. The rifle, horn, rabbit, and birds exhibit the textures of the actual models on which they were (likely) based. For that critic, though, the significance of this fact lay not in the work’s capacity to thus trick the viewer, but in the ability required to produce (or re-produce) them: “the artist shows the highest skill in the representation of textures,” he wrote. The veracity of those textures actually called attention to the proficiency with which Harnett had painted them. I do not mean to pin my interpretation on this one review, but, rather, to suggest that its terms and, so, those used to categorize the Harnett’s work as “trompe l’oeil” were part of a broader discourse about how things were made, used, and displayed that places any claims about “realism” and “illusionism” in context and changes how we understand what they mean. These terms had less to do with what a painting looked like than how it was made and the cognitive implications of this process for artist and viewer alike—a claim that suggests what the seemingly disparate late-nineteenth-century artists who have been categorized under these umbrellas in fact share, amongst themselves and with American culture more generally at the time. Their work, be it in the realm of art, technology, or education, took great interest in how ideas circulate. For William Harnett,
the answer was to be found in the imperceptible yet meticulous brushwork that rendered objects into paint, and paint into objects.
CHAPTER 1

DRAWING: THE MAKING OF...

The only interview with William Harnett, which survives (amongst other places) in the form of a transcript printed in Alfred Frankenstein’s monograph on the artist, begins: “‘My first picture was not painted,’ said Mr. Harnett; ‘neither was it drawn with crayon, nor sketched with India ink, and what is more, there is no copy of it in existence. I was about 13 years old at that time, and my first picture was drawn on my slate in school.’” As Frankenstein points out, the slate reappeared as lot 176 ½ in the estate sale catalogue published upon the artist’s death, where it was listed as “Mr. Harnett’s school slate,” and described as “the slate used by Wm. M. Harnett during his school-boy days at the ‘Zane Street’ school; upon which he has drawn four groupings of Still Life; dated 1861. This is probably his first attempt. The slate was found among the effects of his mother, after her death.” Whether the slate was in fact Harnett’s “school-boy slate” and whether or not it actually bore four still lifes (thirty years after it was, likely, continually used and erased), the artist built the origin myth of his practice around this object. He cited the material support on which he learned to write and draw as the very foundation of his career as a painter.

Yet, extremely little has been written about Harnett’s rather extensive, not to mention, enduring experience with drawing and its connection to his paintings. While nothing has been written about his (admittedly few surviving and only recently known) preparatory drawings, art historian Jennifer Milam has written about the artist’s use of under-drawing on his canvases, and an essay each has been devoted to the fact of Harnett’s academic training and work in the silver

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industry, if not the drawings that he produced there. Harnett’s under-drawing and preparatory studies will be taken up in subsequent chapters, while this one focuses on the two distinct bodies of drawings that the artist produced before his attention turned to painting. These largely instrumental drawings mark his first experience with art-making as well as the institutions in which it was pursued and, as such, can provide much insight into the understanding of visual art that Harnett brought to his work in oil on canvas. For almost ten years before Harnett began painting in earnest, he was immersed in institutions premised upon the practice and application of drawing: namely, the art academy and the silver industry. During this time, he produced academic studies of casts of antique statuary as well as a sketchbook of linear designs that elaborate upon conventional ornamental motifs. Neither of these sets of work takes up the kind of subjects for which the artist and his paintings are best known: small, utilitarian things. Instead, they depict—or even more accurately re-produce—works of art, broadly understood. The sketches and drawings picture art even as they were the very means by which Harnett learned to produce it.

But what did it mean for something to be a work of art, be it a design or representational? How would Harnett have understood things like ornaments and casts in the context of the institutions (the silver industry and the art academy) in which he encountered them? And, given his particular take on these subjects, as well as how drawing was approached in those contexts, how did Harnett understand drawing as a practice and as an image and what would it mean for his paintings? This chapter tackles these questions by recourse to those institutions in which visual art, in all its variety, was made, used, and presented at the time. In the late-nineteenth

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century, by virtue of their operational practices, the design studio, academy, and museum
brought three-dimensional objects and two-dimensional images into dialogue even as they
emphatically distinguished between them on the basis of the kind of work that they entailed. The
way that these institutions framed art-making and that Harnett participated as well as deviated
from their precepts can provide insight into the subjects and techniques, not to mention interests,
that he would take up as a painter. Working and learning within these contexts, Harnett came to
think of objects as well as images as things that are made by way of distinct, if related processes,
and to explore the possible conjunctions between them and their implications for two-
dimensional art.

Part 1

The drawings in Harnett’s sketchbook bear no resemblance to the paintings for which he is
known. There are no books or instruments, no writing implements or man-made tools. Rather,
page after page—fifteen in all, many inscribed on both recto and verso—are filled with
anywhere from one to upwards of twenty two-dimensional designs that vary in size and shape, in
finish and detail, and populate the page in haphazard fashion (figs. 2-4). Many, if not most, of
them cannot readily be identified, constituted as they are of abstract lines and shapes, swirls and
dots and lines that bend every which way. Along with tendrils and spirals, there are various
ovoid and other geometric forms; any attempt to describe them imparts a representational quality
that is distinctly absent from the designs themselves. The book is dated to 1870, when Harnett is
said to have been working at Wood & Hughes and Tiffany & Co., two of the main silver
manufacturers in New York City at the time. Little is known about what Harnett did at these
venerable institutions, although evidence suggests that he was likely an engraver. In his essay for the catalogue of Harnett’s estate sale, his friend Edward Taylor Snow said that Harnett first learned how to engrave steel, copper, and wood at the age of seventeen, and then later expanded to work on silver. In “Burin to Brush: Harnett as an Artisan,” the only essay on William Harnett’s early professional career, auctioneer Paul Raymond Provost supposes that the artist worked the assembly line at Wood & Hughes, possibly doing hand-detailed finishing work, and that he inscribed monograms at Tiffany, although the company itself cannot corroborate the fact that he worked there. Despite the particulars of Harnett’s employment (or the lack thereof) the motifs in this sketchbook—whether or not they were ever actually realized—resemble the designs to which the artist would have been exposed as an employee in the silver industry.

The American silver industry witnessed profound growth in its resources, its markets, and even its creativity in the second half of the nineteenth century. As curator Charles Venable notes in Silver in America, domestic production was encouraged by the Tariff of 1842, which levied high taxes on imported silverware, but also increased the amount of bullion—one of the main sources of silver—in circulation since that was the currency with which European outfits paid the tax. The Comstock Lode, the 1859 discovery of a major silver deposit in present-day Nevada, increased supplies even further. This massive influx of silver helped reduce its cost and, so, generate a broader market for goods no longer just plated in the material, but made of it.

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14 Paul Raymond Provost, “Burin to Brush: Harnett as an Artisan,” in William M. Harnett, 131-132. Employment records at Tiffany & Co. are said not to include the artist’s name. But the comprehensive catalogue, William M. Harnett, published on the occasion of his retrospective includes a chronology that firmly places Harnett at that institution and cites that he was “employed at Wood & Hughes until 1872, engraving monograms and patterns on table silver” (309).
Production increased in response, aided by technological developments like the use of steam power to drive rolling mills and drop presses, as well as by an ever larger and more specialized workforce. Curator Stephen K. Victor writes in “‘From the Shop to the Manufactory’: Silver and Industry, 1800-1970,” that “by the 1870s, twelve distinct trades were exercised by the 450 employees of the Gorham factory [one of the largest manufacturers, along with Tiffany & Co.], including flatware making, designing, die-cutting, pattern-making, stamping, molding, embossing, engraving, chasing, plating, burnishing, and polishing.” Yet, Venable notes that the 1870s were a time of relative “stagnation” in the industry, which adjusted both its designs and its operations so as to increase productivity (Snow suggests that Harnett’s employment may have been a casualty of these changes). Ironically curator Charles H. Carpenter, Jr. asserts that this moment also witnessed “American silver really coming into its own”—no longer imitating the British and the French, but creating “new and original designs.”

Nonetheless, the creation of these “new and original designs” was often premised upon—and even employed—contemporary and historical models. Around 1860, both Tiffany & Co. and Gorham established on-site libraries and curiosity collections for the benefit of their designers. The Tiffany library, which numbered almost 1,000 volumes, addressed everything from Islamic design, natural history, and heraldry to sports, historic costumes, anatomy and anthropology. Venable describes similar books at Gorham;

…an inventory of Gorham’s design room taken in 1871 lists in the design library well over 200 volumes, mostly foreign. Standard works like Owen Jones’s Grammar of Ornament shared shelf space with rarities such as the sixteen-volume

17 Victor, “‘From the Shop to the Manufactory,’” Silver in American Life, 29.
18 Venable, 73-90.
19 Charles H. Carpenter, Jr., Gorham Silver, Rev. ed. (San Francisco: Alan Wofsy Fine Arts, 1997), 53.
20 E.C. Moore Library Book Inventory. Tiffany & Co. Archives. The author of the inventory notes that the library was established in 1860, which is when George Wilkinson assumed the reins as chief designer at Gorham and instituted several changes, likely including the library and collections often catalogued by reviewers in the 1870s and 1880s.
21 E.C. Moore Library Book Inventory. Tiffany & Co. Archives.
Museo Barbonico and Richardson’s *Architectural Remains*. Numerous trade catalogues, including those from Orfevrerie Christofle, Elkington & Co., and James Dixon & Sons, lined the library’s shelves. The rest of the room was filled with dozens of plaster casts and medallions; Wedgwood, parian, and majolica vessels; plaques and statuettes; bronzes and electro-types; and shells.  

The eclectic collections of both three-dimensional objects and reference books, compiled by Edward C. Moore and George Wilkinson, the chief designers at Tiffany & Co. and Gorham, respectively, were to be active tools in the design process. An internal history of the Tiffany library asserts its significance as follows: “it is clear that the books were constantly referred to by the designers in the silver shop. Not only does the library receive frequent mention in the many articles written following tours of the Tiffany facility, but notations in books and auxiliary documents also point to the books’ influence on silver designed under Moore’s tenure.”  

According to both outsiders and designers alike, then, the library was considered an integral aspect of the company’s design process. It constituted as well as provided a ready vocabulary from which designers could borrow and work.  

Although the drawings in Harnett’s sketchbook can fairly be described as abstract or non-representational, specific elements within them bear a distinct resemblance to the kinds of motifs that pervaded the books and objets d’art in such design libraries. A lotus appears on the title page (fig. 5) and, with very rare exception, in some form (blunt-edged, halved, free-floating, circumscribed within another shape) on almost every page thereafter. Likewise, tendrils and spirals figure quite prominently; they tend to emerge, or cascade, from other less discernible forms, as on page 2 (fig. 2). The sketchbook is also speckled with halved and whole palmettes (fig. 6). These motifs are staples of such “standard works” as *Grammar of Ornament* by the

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22 Venable, *Silver in America, 1840-1940*, 76.
23 E.C. Moore Library Book Inventory. Tiffany & Co. Archives.
British architect and designer Owen Jones, held by both Tiffany and Gorham. The book presents one hundred and twelve plates of motifs endemic to the ancient world, Middle East, Far East, and Europe, from various time periods (fig. 7), as well as thirty-seven principles that Jones deduced from them. Culled from private collections and published sources, these images and guidelines were intended to “aid in arresting that unfortunate tendency of our time to be content with copying, whilst the fashion lasts, the forms peculiar to any bygone age, without attempting to ascertain, generally completely ignoring, the peculiar circumstances which rendered an ornament beautiful, because it was appropriate, and which, as expressive of other wants when thus transplanted, as entirely fails.” Presented without comment or explanation, the motifs themselves were meant to exemplify both the products of other cultures as well as the fact that designs should be specific to their time and place—that they should speak to contemporary tastes. The book was supposed to inspire contemporary designers to develop new and unique ornaments appropriate to modern life, but—entirely contrary to Jones’s wishes—was often used as a sourcebook.

Whether or not Harnett referenced books like Grammar of Ornament, or whether he simply knew of things like the lotus and the tendril from his experiences within the silver industry, the ornaments in his sketchbook resonate with this vocabulary and employ it within, or even more commonly amongst, motifs of his own design. Many of the motifs on a single page in his sketchbook will share a similar concern. For example the seven motifs in the top row of page 3 (fig. 8) clearly developed from the first one, which looks like a bold upside-down “w” created with one continuous line. Its composition is then opened; in the third iteration, the line pretty

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25 Jones, 1.
26 The heavier stocks of paper of which the sketchbook is largely comprised are irregularly interspersed with thin pink sheets that resemble contemporary tracing paper; if they served that purpose in Harnett’s day, this paper might suggest the artist did work with specific reference books.
much disappears and the formerly negative space is filled in. By the sixth and seventh iterations, Harnett has become interested in the wing-like silhouette created by the intersecting lines and plays with different, albeit similar ways to fill the area underneath and between them. Likewise, on page 1 (fig. 9), the first motif—perhaps imported from a design manual?—sets the tone for the six that follow, if not the rest of the page. Consisting of two spirals that rotate in opposite directions and are connected by an upside-down lotus in between them, and a diamond floating in the space between the curves, it is the most well defined motif in the top row. In its subsequent iterations, Harnett investigates the silhouette that the combination of these shapes creates and the different ways to fill it, including the two oblong forms that could represent the negative space under the spirals and around the lotus in the first motif. These thematic threads never lead to a finalized, complete design; more often than not, the pages on which they appear devolve into a cacophony of motifs that can be divided into groupings, each of which pick ups on one of several concerns initiated by the first thread. Through these groupings, Harnett dissected an inherited design vocabulary into its constituent parts only to reconstitute them into new forms.

Lines, curves, and triangles were among the subjects addressed by Rembrandt Peale in his primer, *Graphics: A Manual of Drawing and Writing*. As such, the book can help explain what it would mean for Harnett to tweak, disassemble, and then reassemble things like the lotus, tendril, and palmette in his sketchbook. First published in 1835 in Philadelphia, where Harnett grew up, the manual was reissued nineteen times “for the use of schools and families,” as the title page notes, in order to teach children the principles behind these two related practices. While the need to learn how to write required no justification, Peale asserted the significance of

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28 The book was explicitly designed for young students in general rather than budding artists in particular, although Peale did include an additional chapter on drawing at its end for those who might go on to pursue art at an advanced level or as a career. That chapter addressed issues like perspective and facial features.
drawing by describing it as “the most useful of the arts, because it is their handmaid in arranging and defining their purposes; instantly rendering intelligible details that would be obscure, and gratifying the sentiment of taste, by giving to objects of manufacture the attractive forms of elegance.”. It made visible the elemental structure of man-made things, thereby communicating both their function and mechanical beauty. As such, it was also “the simplest of languages” since (visual rather than verbal) it was comprehensible to all. Yet, Peale also attests to the similarity of drawing and writing, noting in the introduction that; “writing is nothing else than drawing the forms of letters. Drawing is little more than writing the forms of objects.”. They were modes of marking and transcription that differed only in the subjects they described—letters, in the case of writing, and objects, in the case of drawing.

The Manual of Drawing is divided into seventeen entries, each based on a different form, which is given its own dedicated page with an illustration and an explanation of how it should be drawn. It covers lines (straight, diagonal, and oblique); triangles (regular and irregular); curves (those within angles and those outside angles; irregular curves and curves defined by angles); circles and ovals; and, finally, Roman capitals. For example, the first entry, on straight lines, reads: “…divide a page into regular squares of about two inches, and, with a pencil or pen, without ruler or compasses, fill up the spaces with lines drawn parallel to each other; sometimes beginning at the top, and as often at the bottom; sometimes at the left, and as often at the right…” The illustration (fig. 10) consists of a dotted rectangle divided into two squares by another dotted line; one square is filled with perfectly vertical lines, alternately drawn from top to bottom or bottom to top; the other is filled with flawless horizontal lines, alternately drawn

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29 Peale, 5.
30 Ibid.
31 Peale, 6.
32 Peale, 13.
from left to right or right to left. But, as Peale points out, “it is not necessary that they should have the appearance of ruled lines, as if intended for drawing machinery or architecture; but rather a general correctness, like the resolute furrows of a well ploughed field.”  

Later, in the entry Practice of the Circle (fig. 11), he reiterates, “few artists have ever attained the ability of drawing such circles without amendment, nor is such perfection necessary.” The entries, then, did not instruct readers how to draw impeccable lines, triangles, and circles; rather, drawing lines, triangles, and curves was treated and framed as an exercise.

The entries refer to drawing’s impact upon both the eye and the hand. In the entry on Straight Lines Peale had the reader practice them “until the hand attains an equal facility in drawing them in any direction, and the eye may be satisfied with their accuracy.” In the entry on the Proportions of Lines, he writes, “after drawing straight lines with accuracy, it is necessary to habituate the eye to measure their proportions… Efforts cannot be too often made to fix the rule and compass in the eye, which can be accomplished only by frequent observation and practice…” The student thus drew successively smaller parallel lines that were a fraction of one another’s lengths in order to learn to judge distances. Likewise, triangles could help to assess and deconstruct objects in the world; the entry on Regular Triangles stipulates that “[the student] must not limit his view to the mere act of drawing these triangles; he must frequently, in noticing the proportions of objects, and their most obvious points, by a mental effort resolve them into triangles …” They enabled one to calculate distances as well as scale by sight. The corollary to this was manual dexterity. In Practice of Curves, Peale directs the student to “retrace and repeat” different linear configurations, like “serpentine lines, sections of curves, and combinations of

33 Ibid.
34 Peale, 22.
35 Peale, 13.
36 Peale, 14.
37 Peale, 18.
straight and curved lines, drawn on a large scale,” “…until the lines, though frequently repeated, shall be but little or irregularly widened; nothing more being intended than to habituate the hand to every motion, and an instantaneous obedience to the will.” Such exercises would accustom the hand to these gestures. Drawing lines and curves and triangles, then, taught the eye how to see and the hand how to move.

It was also preparation for writing. The section on writing in Graphics begins with entries similar to those in the drawing manual: there are ones on oblique ovals, sloping curves, and, later, proportion and curve. Only here, the student practices how to draw these forms within and around the horizontal and oblique guidelines that serve as the foundation of Peale’s writing system. The lines, derived from triangles like those discussed in the drawing manual, would be used to assess the slope and breadth of the individual letters as well as the relationship and distances between them. The letters, however, were not taught as distinct and consecutive units within the alphabet, but divided into five classes;

…the first composed of lines most easily executed, as, i, n, m, u, t, which may be practised [sic] in their parts and entire; the second, consisting of those letters which are defined by the oval, as, o, a, d, g, q, e, and c; the third of h, y, k, p, l, f, and r; the fourth of v, b, and w, in which the lower part of b and latter part of w, are the same as v, and approaching the o; and the fifth, of x, z, f, and s, the most irregular of all.

The letters were categorized according to the shapes of which they were comprised and the complexity with which those shapes were combined. Similar criteria were applied to the words the letters were then used to form; Peale advised students to start with simple words like “man” and build towards more complicated ones like “commune.” He then provided twenty-four multi-syllabic words (fig. 12) arranged into alphabetical order (excepting j and v) that the student could copy in order to practice the forms and proportions of letters and achieve “fluency, parallelism,

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38 Peale, 23.
39 Peale, 43.
and lightness, as well as condensation” between them. Peale was concerned about the shape and spacing of the letters, rather than “hairstroke and swell”—with accuracy rather than decorative flourishes. By way of his exercises, these characteristics would be engrained.

“Writing,” he asserts, “is chiefly acquired by practice, and executed without thought, becoming so mechanical a habit, by constant repetition, that the writer can seldom form his letters but after one fashion.” The letters themselves were made of lines and shapes—of a vocabulary of forms. Writing was a process of learning to imitate them until that act became rote.

Whereas drawing disassembled the world into lines, circles, triangles and the like, writing reconstituted these shapes as letters and words. In the section on Regular Triangles, Peale noted that the student “must not limit his view to the mere act of drawing these triangles; he must frequently, in noticing the proportions of objects, and their most obvious points, by a mental effort resolve them into triangles, with reference, always, to some imaginary perpendicular or horizontal line.” He should, in other words, use things like triangles and curves to help see and thereby transcribe more irregular forms. Writing entailed using the observational and manual skills that the drawing exercises developed, as well as the visual vocabulary in which they trafficked, to construct clear, legible, and elegant letters, words, and texts. It was an additive process that resulted in known and knowable quantities.

Drawing, by contrast, was a much more flexible activity. The designs in the sketchbooks kept by Edward C. Moore, the head designer at Tiffany & Co. in the years Harnett is said to have worked there, are clearly the product of many different hands, but despite differences in finish
and style, are—on the whole—much looser and more ornate than those by our artist (fig. 13). The lines are sketchy and indefinite and the designs not wholly legible. Further, and most unlike Harnett’s designs, those in Moore’s sketchbooks grace depictions and, at times, cut-outs of the actual objects (spoons, forks and knives) that they might grace (fig. 14). As such, these drawings are much more attuned to the overall texture and volume of these objects versus the specifics of every swirl, spiral, and line; they are drawings. By contrast, the motifs in Harnett’s sketchbook are distinct and precise. Perhaps the mark of an engraver, this legibility can also be attributed to the manner in which the designs were produced. Harnett constantly flipped and rotated lines; opened and closed forms; added and subtracted tendrils, dots, and other shapes to create his motifs. Unlike the loose lines and indistinguishable, even illegible, drawings in Moore’s sketchbook, Harnett’s designs unfold, or develop, in the manner that Peale described writing more so than he described drawing. He combined, aligned, and shifted things like lines, spirals, and dots, but he did so to create new graphic symbols rather than reproduce linguistic ones.

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The meaning and cultural significance of such non-representational, graphic symbols was a matter of lively debate in the second half of the nineteenth century. In 1893, Alois Riegl, then the curator of textiles at the Austrian Museum of Art and Industry, expressly set out to address this concern and stake a claim in the debate in his first book, *Problems of Style: Foundations for a History of Ornament*. Riegl’s theories are often discussed within the context of the history of art history, but his writings themselves can provide insight into how ornament was understood in

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the late-nineteenth century. *Problems of Style* attempts to “trace a history of plant motifs from ancient Egypt to western medieval times and to the development of the arabesque in the East,” as art historian Margaret Iversen summarizes in *Alois Riegl: Art History and Theory*. Riegl sought to counter the prevailing “technical-materialist theory of art,” as coined by Gottfried Semper, but, as Riegl assiduously maintained, perverted by his followers. Semper claimed that the first designs were a by-product of the practices of weaving and wickerwork—or, of practical needs—and, as such, arose independently (and unwittingly) in disparate regions around the world. By contrast, Riegl believed that artistic production in all its forms was an autonomous pursuit. It was a discipline, with a history and a purpose. He found a somewhat like-minded colleague in William H. Goodyear, a curator at the Brooklyn Institute and former instructor at Cooper Union, where Harnett would study. In *Grammar of the Lotus: A New History of a Classic Ornament*, Goodyear argued that the “papyrus, rosette, palmette, Ionic capital, anthemion, egg and dart, ivy leaf, fleur-de-lis” and other Egyptian motifs were not distinct flowers, but representations of the lotus and, as such, of the “sun, the resurrection, and creative force and power.” They were conscious artistic endeavors with symbolic significance. Riegl appreciated the creativity and the history that Goodyear ascribed to ornament, but doubted the importance of the “sun cult” to Egyptians let alone to cultures the world over. Instead, in *Problems of Style*, he posited that new ornaments were the result of formal innovations, which responded to aesthetic demands and artistic predecessors.

Rather than techniques or religious beliefs, Riegl believed that ornament responded to, and emerged from, a fundamental desire to represent. He alternatively called this drive the “mimetic impulse,” the “urge to decorate,” the “artistically creative idea,” and “whatever capacity allows

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47 Riegl, 5.
48 Iversen, 52.
human beings to take pleasure in beauty.” 49 This desire found expression in different media as humanity endeavored to represent nature, which Riegl claimed was the model for all art. First, he argued, came sculpture since “once human beings acquired a mimetic instinct, there was nothing very complicated about modeling an animal reasonably well in wet clay, since the model—the living animal—already existed in nature.” 50 It was sheer imitation. He proceeded: “when, however, [human beings] first attempted to draw, engrave, or paint the same animal on a flat surface, they were involving themselves in a truly creative act.” 51 They had to come up with a way to represent three dimensions on a two-dimensional surface, and the silhouette and contour or, more fundamentally, line was invented. Line “became an art form in and of itself”; although the geometric designs that resulted no longer looked like nature, they were still connected to it by virtue of the laws of “symmetry and rhythm,” which governed them both. 52

The resultant motifs, things like the lotus and palmette, were—through a process of cross-cultural exchange whose mechanics Riegl never fully addresses—borrowed and adapted by other cultures. For example, he claimed the Mycenaens softened a “geometric scroll pattern” that was borrowed from the Egyptians to produce the tendril, which initiated the “all-over pattern” characteristic of late antiquity. 53 Further, in countering arguments that the tendril developed from metalwork or embroidery, he asserted that “the pattern executed in corded embroidery is also dependent upon the artistic conception of the human being who executes it. The threads did not fall into loops simply of their own accord.” 54 In other words, no matter whether their source material lay in his predecessors or in nature, original designs were the product of conscious

49 Riegl, 3, 31, 33, 40.
50 Riegl, 14.
51 Ibid.
52 Riegl, 15.
53 Iversen, 61.
54 Riegl, 168.
decisions on the part of an artist. The changes made witnessed his thoughtful interventions into practices like painting, drawing, and incising, if any techniques. Yet, even so, Riegl asserts that “neither the brush nor the stylus can create something by themselves; they must be controlled by the human hand, and the hand in turn by artistic inspiration, which has the irresistible urge to create something new out of inherited traditions and the mind’s perception.” All designs are therefore the realization—the product—of formal decisions and, more so, of human agency.

Rather than religious imperatives or material patterns, new ornaments responded to visual or, better, formal demands—the need to fill a certain space or connect extant forms so as to satisfy the visual or creative impulse. As such, they did not represent a particular god or a design that emerged from something like weaving or basket-making, but the peoples, the culture, that devised them—what they considered a formal “problem” to be and the manner in which they “solved” it. An ornament was thus, and quite emphatically, a man-made thing—not unlike the objects upon which they were often inscribed and seen. Unlike the designs discussed by Riegl and pictured in the sketchbook kept by one-time Tiffany & Co. head designer Edward C. Moore, Harnett’s drawings did not grace the necks of urns or the handles of knives. Instead, they float and hover upon the page with little to no concern for its overall appearance. Harnett was not interested in the relationship between the forms on the page, or even between the page and the forms, but in the formal possibilities of the ornaments, motifs, and designs as “objects” unto themselves. He took them apart, twisted and tweaked their constituent parts, and reconstituted them in new ways. The graphic symbols that resulted were his very own inventions—motifs that he had created and devised, “new and original designs.” If they represented anything then, it

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55 Riegl, 168.
56 Charles H. Carpenter, Jr., Gorham Silver, Rev. ed. (San Francisco: Alan Wofsy Fine Arts, 1997), 53.
was the efforts of the person who made them and his vision of what the vocabulary that he had inherited could and might do.

Per Riegl, the lotus, palmette, and other recognizable symbols from the design vocabulary to which Harnett would have been exposed during his time in the silver industry were distinctly man-made inventions; they were not by-products of other practices like weaving and wicker-work, but specifically devised in order to decorate things like vases and even faces. In and through his sketches, Harnett took these symbols apart in order to determine as well as reimagine how they were constructed. As such, he approached sketching less in the manner of drawing, as described by people like Peale, than writing. It was not just a way to train his eye and his hand to see and record, but an effort to re-present an extant vocabulary of forms and shapes. In the process, however, Harnett experimented with, and created, new graphic motifs. His technique was thus akin to writing, but the products of it looked like drawings as they were imagined in places like Peale’s manual. Harnett’s sketchbook thus begins to explore, whether consciously or not, the relationship between these two practices and their implications for the work that is their result. The successive designs contained within it track as well as advance the process by which Harnett analyzed and developed the kind of motifs one might have traditionally seen engraved on the end of a fork or a knife. Within the space of the book, they stand not as “negative” incisions into three-dimensional objects, but as “positive” marks on and across a two-dimensional surface. The sketches thus index the intellectual as well as the manual process by which they were made.

Part 2

Harnett continued to work in the silver industry until 1875, but as early as 1866—just a year after he started engraving on steel, copper, and wood—he began taking art classes, first in
Philadelphia, then in New York, and eventually back in his hometown. He took antique classes at
the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts that year. By 1869, Harnett had moved to New York,
where he was registered for a year at the Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art.
From 1872 through 1876, he continued to take antique classes at the National Academy of
Design, where he was also registered in the Life Class in 1874. Harnett was back in Philadelphia
in 1876, presumably on account of the World’s Fair being held in that city, and took up life
classes at PAFA, where he also resumed his studies from the antique in 1877. The last quarter
of the nineteenth century was a time of great transition at both PAFA and NAD, where Harnett
completed the bulk of his studies. When they opened in 1805 and 1826, respectively, the schools
provided little more than space in which to draw from their cast collections. But, by the late
1860s, in the case of PAFA, and the early 1870s, for the National Academy, they had hired their
first full-time instructors: Christian Schussele and Lemuel Wilmarth, respectively. Both of these
artists had trained in Europe (Schussele under Paul de la Roche, and Wilmarth under Jean-Léon
Gérôme, who would go on to instruct Thomas Eakins, Schussele’s successor at PAFA), helped
standardize the curriculum, and instituted regular critiques. Students started their academic
careers in the Antique class, where they worked from plaster casts of classical statuary, and then
graduated to the Life class to work from a live model. They were thus acquainted with the
primary vehicle of academic art: the human figure.

58 For the history of the National Academy of Design, see: Eliot Clark, History of the National Academy of Design,
1825-1953 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1954); Lois Marie Fink and Joshua C. Taylor, Academy: The
Academic Tradition in American Art: An Exhibition Organized on the Occasion of the One Hundred and Fiftieth
Anniversary of the National Academy of Design, 1825-1975 (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press,
1975)
For the history of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, see: In This Academy: The Pennsylvania Academy of
the Fine Arts, 1805-1976 (Philadelphia: The Academy, 1976); Ronald J. Onorato, The Pennsylvania Academy of the
Fine Arts and the Development of an Academic Curriculum in the Nineteenth Century (Ph.D. diss., Brown
University, 1977); Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts: 200 Years of Excellence (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania
Academy of Fine Arts, 2005). For an account of artistic training in nineteenth-century America, see: Mark
Mitchell, The Artist-Makers: Professional Art Training in Mid-Nineteenth-Century New York City (Ph.D. diss.,
Princeton University, 2002).
Only three academic drawings by Harnett survive, or are known, and two of them depict the body. *Borghese Warrior* (fig. 15) is a drawing of its eponymous subject, a male nude engaged in hand-to-hand combat, likely with a mounted opponent. His left arm reaches up, while his left leg extends back, and his body is twisted and turned towards the picture plane. Likewise, *Venus de Milo* (fig. 16) is a depiction of its famed subject: a woman in a contrapposto stance, who is disrobed to the waist. Both renditions—incredibly early works for the artist—are quite clunky: either the arms and legs of the *Borghese Warrior* are too short or his torso is too long, and the upper part of his torso is not as far into profile as it should be. The *Venus de Milo* also displays some anatomical inaccuracies: her breasts are inordinately conical, and Harnett’s difficulties with her left foot are evident in the way that it dissolves into a frustrated squiggle. His treatment of the body betrays his inexperience with drawing and with drawing the human figure, in particular, as well as with anatomy in general. But the way that Harnett tackled this challenge says much about his investment in the casts that he was asked to depict.

By the early 1870s, anatomy had already been introduced into the curriculum at PAFA and NAD and fundamentally changed the way that artists depicted the human body. Of the variety of books on the subject, the most popular textbook at the time—and the one that Thomas Eakins recommended to his students—was *Anatomy: Descriptive and Surgical* (now known as *Gray’s Anatomy*, after the author of its text, British surgeon Henry Gray), then in at least its third American and fifth English editions, and amply illustrated by Gray’s colleague Dr. Henry Carter. The textbook was divided into no less than two hundred and fifty sections that dissected the human body into its constituent parts, from various organs to systems and everything in between. A section on the Muscles of the Abdomen, which corresponds to one of

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the most intricate sections of the *Borghese Warrior* is representative of how the body was pictured in this text. The section revolves around five illustrations. The first is a line drawing of the male body from just below the pectoral muscles to above the knee (fig. 17). It is seen from the outside in a three-quarter turn, with a large incision down the torso and two shorter ones extending out from it. The three panels of skin these incisions create are pulled back to reveal a dark and cavernous interior. A small inscription beside the body notes that the diagram represents “dissection of Incuinal Hernia.” The next three drawings (figs. 18-20) transcend the epidermis. They picture the External Oblique Muscle, the Internal Oblique Muscle, and the Transversalis, Rectus, and Pyramidalis Muscles, but they all look quite similar. The torso is represented in profile and stripped of its skin, and its fibrous tissue made visible. These are the three layers of muscle that envelope the chest cavity. The final illustration is a *Transverse Section of the Abdomen in the Lumbar Region* (fig. 21); it pictures a ring-shaped form in which the External Oblique, Internal Oblique, Transversalis, Rectus, and Pyramidalis are shown as roughly concentric circles. The Obliques and Transversalis constitute the sides of the “ring,” and the rectus forms the top and base. The illustrations thereby peel away the layers of the trunk to reveal the armature that undergirds it; as such, they posit and picture the visible body as a consequence of the complex networks as well as systems beneath it.

The anatomical casts of things like a torso, a leg, and even a neck that Thomas Eakins produced for the benefit of students at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts offer a similar perspective on the body. Made in the late 1870s, when Eakins was chief demonstrator in Dr. William Williams Keen’s anatomy lectures at the school, the casts (of both human and animal subjects) were made of plaster from gelatin molds taken from écorchés as well as dissections
carried out in Keen’s class. The Front of Male Torso (fig. 22) corresponds to the section from Gray’s Anatomy highlighted above as well as the central focus of Borghese Warrior. It maintains the shape of the body, but, based as it is on an écorché, it reveals the muscles around the groin and those that spread across the chest. A couple of incisions along its right side suggest how thin and numerous each layer of the body actually is. The entire surface is painted a reddish hue that renders the plaster into a fleshy, if slightly wooden mass, which was then inscribed in yellow capital letters with the Latin names of the key muscles in this region, like the Rectus Abdominis and the Pectoralis Minor. Like the drawings in Gray’s Anatomy, the casts reveal the complex infrastructure of the body; further, they make it visible and, in this case, legible on the surface of the skin. The body was understood and shown as an organic whole whose exterior plane was only the final or outermost of many successive and related parts. Anatomical depictions of the body, be they two-dimensional or three-dimensional, drawn or modeled pictured it as an organic whole, a complex mass of interlocked and interconnected parts that informed both its internal activities as well as its external appearance. They pictured it from the inside out.

At art academies like the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and the National Academy of Design, casts like Borghese Warrior and Venus de Milo were meant to serve as substitutes for the human body and, more specifically, as immobile surrogates for the body in motion. Students might then bring anatomical precision to their drawings of the casts in order to help evoke the

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61 For more on Thomas Eakins’s casts, see: Kathleen A. Foster, “Sculpture: The Legacy of the École,” in Thomas Eakins Rediscovered: Charles Bregler’s Collection at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (Philadelphia: The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997); Susan James-Gadzinski and Mary Mullen Cunningham, American Sculpture in the Museum of American Art at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (Philadelphia: Museum of American Art of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in association with the University of Washington Press, Seattle and London, 1997). Amy Werbel, Thomas Eakins: Art, Medicine, and Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007). The conservation reports on the plaster casts held by the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts detail the fascinating process by which the objects were made, including the noteworthy mixture of painting and “sculpture” that it entailed. These casts are not to be confused with the bronze set that Eakins’s widow, Susan Macdowell Eakins, made from her plaster set in 1930. Given the subject that they depict, the methods used to make them, and the significance of these concerns for nineteenth-century American art, the history and afterlife of Eakins’s casts as well as the contexts in which they have been used and seen certainly warrants concerted interpretation.
dynamism inherent within the original sculptures. That is certainly how Daniel Garber would depict Michelangelo’s Slave (fig. 23) several decades after Harnett depicted the Borghese Warrior and Venus de Milo; he rendered the cast with all the emotion and vitality that Michelangelo invested in the original sculpture. By contrast, Harnett’s depictions of the Borghese Warrior and Venus de Milo read as quite stiff. Granted, he likely submitted Borghese Warrior for entrance into the life class at PAFA so his knowledge of anatomy was likely quite limited at the time. Nonetheless, Harnett makes little to no effort to depict the casts as bodies—as nudes. He certainly indicates the presence of muscles in the torsos of both figures (and in the legs of the Warrior) but they are distinctly aspects of the casts, if not the original sculptures, and not a nod towards the physiology of the human body. Carter’s illustrations for Anatomy: Descriptive and Surgical and Eakins’s casts pictured the body as a sensate system encased within an outer shell, which they rendered legible with the contents normally hidden within it; the muscles of the abdomen were impressed or imprinted into the figure—be it rendered as a contour drawing or a plaster rendition of the torso. But Harnett was interested in how the exterior of the body—this outer shell—had been depicted by other artists. He approached the casts of the Borghese Warrior and the Venus de Milo as objects; his drawings, in contrast to the intentions of the academies where he rendered them, depicted the casts as always already representations of the human figure.

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If Harnett did not depict Borghese Warrior and Venus de Milo as nudes, he certainly could be said to have depicted them as the casts that they were. Both figures are shown standing on the
flat slabs to which the casts were affixed, and the Warrior’s left calf is melded to the urn, which would have supported the weight of the marble sculpture on which it was based. The Venus de Milo’s arms are cut off at the shoulders: the right with a blunt edge, and the left with a more jagged one. Harnett does not ignore or obscure these facets of the casts in an attempt to enable his drawings to read as depictions of live models; rather he embraces them and depicts the casts as objects, as material things. They are emphatically stationary and calciferously textured.

Borghese Warrior and Venus de Milo were already incredibly well known and prominent sculptures by the late-nineteenth century. Then as now, the original sculptures were housed in the Louvre, and reproductions dotted the globe, available in art academies like the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. However, they could also be seen in the new public museums that were springing up all along the East Coast in these years. In 1873, the year to which both of Harnett’s cast drawings are dated, the artist was based in New York, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art moved into the Douglas Mansion, its second temporary home since opening its doors three years earlier. The thinking behind the Museum’s acquisition of casts and its display of original works of art can provide great insight into what it meant for Harnett to depict Borghese Warrior and Venus de Milo as material things rather than sensate bodies.

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62 William Brownell notes the presence of a cast of the Venus de Milo in his description of PAFA in “The Art Schools of Philadelphia” (1879). Although neither he nor Ronald J. Onorato cite the Borghese Warrior in particular in their discussions of the school, the fact that this piece was owned by the National Academy of Design, where Harnett drew it, and that it appears in PAFA’s cast collection today, which was assembled to replace the one destroyed by fire in 1847, suggests that PAFA likely owned a cast of the Borghese Warrior in the late-nineteenth-century. See Onorato’s “Exciting the Efforts of Artists”: Art Instruction at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts” in Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts: 200 Years of Excellence (2005) for more on the vision for, and accumulation of, PAFA’s original cast collection.

63 Although the precise dates in which these casts entered the Met’s collection are unknown, the Museum began a formal cast collection in 1886 and continued to add to it until 1895 (Catalogue of the Collection of Casts, vii-viii). The early history of museums in the United States is addressed, amongst other places, in: Steven Conn, Museums and American Intellectual Life, 1876-1926 (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1998) and in Hugh H. Genoways and Mary Anne Andrei, eds., Museum Origins: Readings in Early Museum History and Philosophy (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2008).
The Metropolitan Museum of Art was incorporated in 1870 without a collection, a building, or, arguably, an audience. It was founded by a professionally diverse group of private citizens, including the poet and editor of the *New York Evening Post* William Cullen Bryant; Daniel Huntington, the President of the National Academy of Design; F.A.P. Barnard, President of Columbia College; Henry G. Stebbins, President of the Central Park Commission; and artists like Frederic E. Church, John Kensett, and Eastman Johnson, amongst politicians, professors, and many others:

…for the purpose of establishing and maintaining in [New York] a museum and library of art, of encouraging and developing the study of the fine arts, and the application of arts to manufactures and practical life, of advancing the general knowledge of kindred subjects, and, to that end, of furnishing popular instruction and recreation.

As this passage from the act of incorporation begins to suggest and other documents from the museum’s early history continually imply, as well as unlike major museums in Europe, the museum was not simply to be a repository for art so much as an educational institution—an intellectual resource, even tool, for those who both made and bought decorative arts. From the outset, the museum aspired to acquire a comprehensive collection with this pedagogical goal in mind. The *Report of the Art Committee to the Executive Committee of the Union League* suggested that “the Metropolitan Museum of Art should be based on the idea of a more or less complete collection of objects illustrative of the History of Art, from the earliest beginnings to the present time.” In his address, Prof. Comfort took this a step further and specified that “a great museum—one worthy of New York City and of our country, should represent the History

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of Art in all countries and in all ages—of art both pure and applied.”67 When the officers of the Museum (namely, President John Taylor Johnston, Treasurer Samuel Gray Ward, and Theodore Weston, Recording Secretary) introduced it to the citizens of New York, they proclaimed that “works of art to be worthy of selection for the permanent collections of the Museum should be representative examples of a school, a style, or an epoch…”68 The objects, which would include both decorative and fine arts, were to stand for particular approaches to, or periods within, the history of art and serve as examples as well as inspiration to designers and consumers alike.

The immediate challenge was how to acquire such a collection when so many key works were already placed in other museums or prohibitively expensive. The trustees thus made frequent appeals to private collectors to donate their own holdings, which would in fact generate the core of the museum’s collection, and to private citizens to offer funds in order that they might be purchased.69 In the meantime, the Art Committee, including artist Frederic Church, and Prof. Comfort extolled the virtues (and availability) of casts and reproductions. The Committee writes, “fortunately, there is a large class of objects of the highest beauty and of inestimable value toward the formation of sound taste in Art, which can be had in great completeness by a comparatively moderate expenditure, and with the smallest possible delay. These are the Casts of Statues and Sculpture of all sorts, of Architectural subjects, and details.”70 Comfort declares; “it is possible to reproduce every work of sculpture in the world as perfect, in form, as the originals. A museum should contain casts in plaster of Paris of the great works of sculpture of all ages and of all countries.” He even suggests that the texture and opacity of plaster copies made them

67 Prof. George Fisk Comfort, [Address], in A Metropolitan Art-Museum in the City of New York: Proceedings of a Meeting Held at the Theatre of the Union League Club, Tuesday Evening, November 23, 1869 Including Addresses, Remarks, and Letters (New York: Printed for the Committee, 1869), by Mr. W.C. Bryant, Prof. Comfort, Mr. R.M. Hunt, Mr. Henry G. Stebbins, Mr. Wm. J. Hoppin, Mr. Russell Sturgis, Jr., Rev. Dr. Thompson, Rev. Dr. Bellows, Mr. Marshall O. Roberts, Mr. Geo. Wm. Curtis, and others, 13.
68 Address of the Officers of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 3.
69 Annual Report of the Trustees, 1871-1892.
preferable to marbles, which could be imperfect and “semi-translucent.” Copies of two-dimensional work—prints and photographs—were also put on display. In fact, by 1889, one of only three curators at the Museum oversaw casts and reproductions; another was responsible for paintings, drawings, and prints, and a third covered sculptures, antiquities and objets d’art. This acceptance and even enthusiasm for casts suggests that the Museum was less interested in a work for its material properties than for the subject it represented and for the form that that representation took.

The installation of the Cesnola Collection of antiquities from Cyprus, the Museum’s first cache of original antiquities, and the subsequent controversy around its authenticity helps demonstrate how the Museum’s priorities began to shift as the institution became a physical reality. The collection, which consisted of over 5,000 items, including “coins, glass, statues, inscriptions, bas-reliefs, bronzes, jewelry, statuary, terra-cotta vases, and pottery,” was amassed by General Luigi Palma de Cesnola while he was the American consul in Cyprus from 1865 to 1877 and sold to the Metropolitan Museum, where it quickly became the centerpiece of the Douglas Mansion installation. As Hiram Hitchcock points out in his preface to the guidebook for the Cesnola collection, the amateur archaeologist was interested in the number as well as the diversity of the cultures—from the Egyptians to the Phoenicians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, and Turks—that had had dominion over the small island-nation; his installation would seek to highlight the resonances between them. As Hitchcock writes;

71 Prof. George Fisk Comfort, [Address], in *A Metropolitan Art-Museum in the City of New York*, 13.
73 *Guide to the Cesnola Collection of Antiquities from the Island of Cyprus* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, [1873 or 1874]), 1.
74 For the history of General Luigi de Cesnola’s archaeological activities and the sale of his collection, see: Anna Marankou, *The Consul Luigi Palma di Cesnola, 1832-1904: Life & Deeds* (Nicosia: Cultural Centre, Popular Bank Group, 2000). Cesnola was actually made the director of the Museum (the first paid director in its brief history) in 1879 and held the position until his death in 1904.
These remarkable monuments discovered in Cyprus—so remarkable in the history of art—illustrated better than scholastic theories and traditions, the manner in which the civilization, religion and arts of Egypt and Assyria were transmitted to the Phoenicians and adopted by the Greeks.\(^{75}\)

To the extent possible, the sculptures were largely organized chronologically, with the smaller objects seemingly grouped by function and/or medium rather than by culture. For example, the first twelve cases in Room A, on the first floor, contained vases; while cases 13, 14 and 15 held small household goods; 16 and 17, copper and bronze objects; 17, those made of stone; and 18 ancient, pottery. As it put objects on display, then, the Metropolitan Museum of Art became increasingly interested in their material and physical properties as well as what those properties could reveal not just about individual cultures, but about the connections between them. The form and constitution of the objects in the collection came to represent the resources and ideals that the cultures embraced as well as the means by which those resources and ideals were shared.

The increasing import of a work’s material constitution became particularly evident when French art dealer Gaston Feuardent accused Cesnola and the Museum of “deceptive alterations and unintelligent restorations.”\(^{76}\) Feuardent had previously helped Cesnola try to sell his collection to the Louvre and the British Museum, but in 1880, the year the Museum would move into its permanent home on Fifth Avenue, he published a scathing critique, if not an outright condemnation, of the amateur archaeologist in the *Art Amateur*. Feuardent claimed that Cesnola had the small lotus flower held by a female statuette changed into a mirror so that the figure could be identified as the famed Venus or Aphrodite, rather than the lesser-known Elpsis, or Hope, which Feuardent believed the statuette to be based on an earlier description of its lotus flower by Cesnola himself. The scandal played out in the press and eventually grew into a libel

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\(^{75}\) H.H. [Hiram Hitchcock], [introductory essay], *Guide to the Cesnola Collection*, 7.

suit, which would see Cesnola exonerated, although the American Numismatic and Archaeological Society of New York sided with Feuardent and condemned Cesnola’s actions. Cesnola would eventually be cleared of all suspicion in 1910, when Oxford University professor of Cypriote Art, J. L. Myres declared the works (the case grew to include five other objects) authentic, but not before two of the large sculptures were put on display in the Great Hall to be prodded, picked, and otherwise tested by whomever questioned the authenticity of the materials comprising them. This incredibly rich, if unfortunate controversy marks a key turning point in the history of art—in which the didactic value of a work of art was explicitly aligned with its material properties. As the case against Cesnola came to include more works and played out in both the popular press and, ultimately, in court, the concern centered less on whether or not the amateur archaeologist had changed a lotus flower into a mirror, but the means by which this could be investigated—namely, whether the materials of which that sculpture and others were comprised were, in fact, original to them. The originality—the authenticity—of a work came to be associated with its physical constitution, with the materials used to make it and how they were

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77 Amongst other places, the controversy around Cesnola’s collection is described in: Anna Marankou, The Consul Luigi Palma di Cesnola, 1832-1904: Life & Deeds (2000) and Calvin Tomkins, Merchants and Masterpieces: The Story of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York: H. Holt, 1989). These sources point to a wealth of primary sources on the matter, which deserves concerted study for the insights it can provide into the definition of art, the function of museums, the role of art history as well as the intersection of these things in America at the end of the nineteenth century.

78 This shocking and fascinating occurrence is discussed in Anna Marankou, The Consul Luigi Palma di Cesnola, 1832-1904 (2000) and Calvin Tomkins, Merchants and Masterpieces: The Story of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (1989).

79 Lawrence Levine makes a related claim in Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America. Further, he argues that the prioritization of original artworks over casts and reproductions by public museums, like the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, at the turn of the century was one of the ways in which culture was sanctified in America (151-155). Levine contends that as museums initiated a divide between originals and copies, they instituted a rift between the audiences for art, as well. This chapter explores the implications of the interest in original works of art by museums for the way in which artists like Harnett came to understand the practice of art-making. A concerted study of the changing perception of the material properties of works of art at the end of the nineteenth-century would consider if and how these objects were understood similarly to or differently from those that filled early modern European kunstkammer as well as places like Charles Willson Peale’s museum in the United States.

80 See, for example, the extended discussion of what constitutes a repair versus a restoration in the testimony from the trial, which is excerpted in W.J. Stillman’s Report on the Cesnola Collection to the Council and Members of the American Numismatic and Archaeological Society of New York.
worked. A cast, by contrast, was a representation of *some thing*. It was a reproduction of how a certain subject had been represented.

The *Borghese Warrior* cast from which Harnett made his drawing was based on a marble sculpture created by Agasias of Ephesus circa 100 BCE (fig. 24). The band on the man’s left forearm originally prompted scholars to identify the subject of the sculpture as a gladiator—despite the gladiator not being a fixture of Greek culture. Today, he is understood as a fighting warrior, and Marie-Benedicte Astier of the Louvre, where the work is currently housed, suggests that the marble version may have been based on a bronze sculpture by Lysippos of Sicyon from the fourth century BCE based on its “elongated silhouette, the reduced proportions of the head and the vigorously-modeled muscles….”

Yet, other features are endemic to its own time, such as the urn likely introduced to support the weight of the marble and, most importantly, the rotation of the figure. Astier notes that, “the boldness of the composition, which anchors the warrior in a three-dimensional space and invites the spectator to view it from all sides, is a constant in Hellenistic art.” The work was thus “praised as an aesthetic model of the male nude in motion” and reproduced by artists and for collectors—witness Joseph Wright of Derby’s *Three Persons Viewing the Gladiator by Candlelight*—since its re-discovery in the early seventeenth century. Harnett does not picture this work nor the *Venus de Milo* as bodies in motion, which was the explicit purpose of the cast collections of which they were a part. Rather he exalts in the stolid texture of the bodies and the physical reminders that they are casts, including things like the *Venus de Milo*’s lost arms and the *Borghese Warrior*’s stabilizing urn, as well as the plaster slabs on which both of the figures stand. At the time, casts were being

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81 Marie-Benedicte Astier, “Fighting Warrior,” Louvre, [http://www.louvre.fr](http://www.louvre.fr). For an introduction to the *Borghese Warrior* and *Venus de Milo* as well as depictions of them in a variety of media and contexts, see: *D’après l’antique* (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, c2000).

82 Ibid.
displayed in places like the Metropolitan Museum of Art in order to illustrate the subjects that the antique sculptures on which they were based took up. Their significance may not have inhered in their physical properties, but they were selected as material agents or envoys for the cultures from which they came. That is precisely how Harnett renders them: as emphatically material things. He approaches and represents the Borghese Warrior and Venus de Milo as objects that have been man-made.

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These material things, the casts of Borghese Warrior and Venus de Milo, are accommodated to the physical parameters of the sheet on which Harnett depicted them. The crotch of the cast in Borghese Warrior marks the precise midpoint of its over-sized 39 ½ x 34 in. paper, and his outstretched arm and foot nestle into its upper left and lower right hand corners respectively. Further, in both drawings, the slab base on which the casts stand are positioned in relation to the bottom edge of the paper; in Borghese Warrior, the bottom of the slab is aligned with it; in Venus de Milo, its top edge is. The cast in Venus de Milo is also anchored to the middle of the page—in this case, by her navel. In both works, the physical expanse of the paper is mobilized as an integral aspect of the drawings. Sprig of Plums (fig. 25), the third and final extant academic drawing by Harnett, exhibits this quality in the extreme. The drawing depicts a bas-relief of its eponymous subject—betrayed to be a sculpture rather than an actual sprig by the uniform texture of the twig, leaves, and fruit. As in Borghese Warrior and Venus de Milo, the center of the object (where the fruit joins the twig) is aligned with the center of the page, with the twig extending up and down the paper from that point. Here, though, the rest of the paper (as in Borghese Warrior)
has been treated with gray wash to render the stone or plaster from which the sprig is relieved. In a gesture that anticipates the wooden planks that constitute the background of his most well known works, Harnett makes his subject matter coextensive with the support (in this case, the paper) on which it is rendered. He uses the specifications of the paper to help configure his drawings and to attend to the scale, size, and proportions of the objects depicted upon it.

It is unknown whether Harnett was instructed to depict his subjects in this manner, or if it was his choice. But, by all accounts, academic study in the nineteenth century was not as prescribed as one might think. Although the 1860s and 1870s did see NAD and PAFA hire their first full-time instructors and outline a standard course of study including regular critiques, by no means was class time strictly regimented. In an 1887 interview with *The Art Amateur*, Lemuel Wilmarth, the director of NAD, described (and prescribed) his approach to the classroom. He discussed how the students and the lighting should be arranged, the types and lengths of poses the model should take and the kind of apparatuses that could help with that, as well as the roles that select students would need to play—as monitors, negotiating between the students and the model, and as assistants, calling Wilmarth’s attention to any issues. These parameters attended to the practical circumstances of the classroom but, within them, as well as with regular critiques, students were encouraged to develop at their own pace. Wyatt Eaton took a similar approach at the Cooper Union, as did Walter Shirlaw and, later, William Meritt Chase at the Art Students League.

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84 William C. Brownell, “The Art-Schools of New York,” *Scribner’s Monthly*, 16, no. 6 (October 1878). Almost a year later (September, 1979), Brownell published an article on the art schools of Philadelphia in which he compared the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts to comparable institutions in New York. The similarities and differences between these schools, both those within and across these cities, suggest that issues like the relationship between drawing and painting as well as the body and the object, which Harnett explicitly addressed in his work, pervaded
painters, the primary media used and taught within their classes were crayon and charcoal and perhaps graphite, and the main goal of their instruction was “accuracy,” as it was often stated by the anonymous author of “The Art-Schools of New York,” an 1878 article in *Scribner’s Monthly*. The author suggests that faithfully transcribing the model was the very foundation of artistic education in New York and, of the National Academy of Design in particular, he noted that “nothing but drawing is taught.” The lessons of the academy, then, were not all that dissimilar from Rembrandt Peale’s in his manual; they sought to train the student how to see and to transcribe what he saw—they simply focused on one particular subject, the human body.

But, as we have seen, Harnett did not choose to depict the casts of *Borghese Warrior* and *Venus de Milo* as surrogates for the human body. He did not animate the plaster, as did Daniel Gruber in his depiction of the cast of Michelangelo’s *Slave*. Rather, he drew and presented them as works of art, material things, objects and, further, as objects very clearly configured to the specifications of the page. As such, it can be instructive to consult Thomas Eakins’s posthumously published drawing manual, which addressed how to depict objects in particular and, further, how to depict objects on a two-dimensional plane in order to understand what it meant for Harnett to depict these casts in relation to the physical parameters of the pieces of paper that they graced. Eakins began writing the manual in 1881, but set it aside five years later, when he was fired from the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts after removing the loincloth of a male model in a women’s life class. Kathleen Foster compiled the extant materials into a short text that lays out Eakins’s thoughts on linear perspective, mechanical and isometric discussions in the academies that he attended, while he was attending them, about how art should be taught and made.

85 “The Art-Schools of New York,” [unpaginated].
drawing, and includes sections on the depiction of reflections in water and of sculptured relief, as well as brief primers on constructing a camera, muscle activity, and refraction.  

Much has been written about the relationship between drawing and painting in Eakins’s work. Some, like Michael Fried and Michael Leja, see a productive disjuncture between these two practices—one that becomes evident (albeit in different ways, and for different reasons) on the surface of the canvas. Kathleen Foster, among others, sees them as complementary in Eakins’s oeuvre. But all agree that, for Eakins, drawing—particularly perspectival drawing—was a kind of mathematical or, at least, intellectual practice. Describing the construction of The Champion Single Sculls, Michael Leja writes:

Eakins devised an artistic practice that was analytic, conceptual, and additive. He broke down his subjects into component parts, plotted and rendered according to systematic principles, and additively recombined. Linear perspective put the boat and other objects in space; anatomical research modeled the figures; mathematical calculations generated the reflections; and so on.

Similarly, in “Thinking Made Visible,” her essay on drawing for Thomas Eakins Rediscovered, Kathleen Foster notes that activities like borrowing plans from boat builders and making “measured drawings” “reminds us again that very little—perhaps nothing—in these drawings is

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88 See Michael Fried, Realism, Writing, Disfiguration: On Thomas Eakins and Stephen Crane (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987) and Michael Leja, “Eakins’s Reality Effects,” in Looking Askance: Skepticism and American Art from Eakins to Duchamp (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2004). Leja suggests that the perceptual inaccuracies within the paintings (being able to see the spokes in a moving wheel or ripples that should have dissipated) can be attributed to Eakins’s preparatory drawings and paradoxically, or ironically, invested his work with greater accuracy, or “reality effects.” For Fried, The Gross Clinic and other works by Eakins—even those, like the rowing pictures, which are invested in radically different subjects—exhibit formal allusions to writing/drawing that witness an “oedipal” struggle between the pictorial and the graphic, between seeing and knowing. In this dissertation, I contend that Harnett both addressed and attempted to reconcile the tension that these scholars recognize between drawing and painting in Eakins’s work by way of the kinds of objects that he painted and the techniques that he employed to depict them such that his works married seeing to knowing for both artist and viewer alike.
89 Foster, “Drawing: Thinking Made Visible,” in Thomas Eakins Rediscovered. As opposed to Leja and Fried, Foster looks at the drawings unto themselves, apart from the paintings, and explores the function they served within Eakins’s artistic practice, arguing it was “both master and servant” (70), a means to outline and construct the subjects of his work in other media. Leja and Fried’s studies, which predate Foster’s essay, nonetheless interpret the significance of the artist’s experience with drawing in these veins and others for our understanding of his paintings.
90 Leja, 65.
done from observation; the space and the most important objects are entirely generated by the geometry of linear perspective and a set of measurements.” For Eakins, then, drawing was a way to dissect things and space (like he had bodies as an assistant to Dr. William Williams Keen). It was a way to explore and understand how they operated.

Eakins’s manual was a primer on perspective that was meant to accompany his lectures on the subject and convey these mathematical principles to his students. As Foster succinctly summarizes it, “linear perspective, discovered or invented during the Renaissance, offers a system for the illusionistic depiction of space and three-dimensional objects on a two-dimensional surface.” It was, according to Eakins, dependent upon the location of three elements: the picture plane, the artist/viewer, and the models that were being depicted (fig. 26). In three deeply technical chapters, Eakins explained how to identify those points and, thus, establish a relationship between them. First, the artist was to determine the point of sight, or the spot on the canvas or paper opposite his eye. Next, a horizon line was extended from it, and, lastly, one determined the placement of the canvas along the spectrum between the models and the eye, or the place from which the picture would be seen. In fact, Eakins referred to this final calculation as the “one and only law of perspective,” namely: “as the distance of the object from the eye is to the distance of the picture plane from the eye so is the size of the real object to the size of the picture of this object.” Perspective then was a proportion that triangulated between these three quantities and established the scale, depth, and character of the space within the picture plane.

Once the canvas was in place and the major calculations resolved, the canvas was gridded using “little squares” (fig. 27), mathematically derived units that converged towards the

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93 *A Drawing Manual*, 49.
vanishing point. The subject of the painting could then be fitted into this grid. Eakins advised novices to envision or even enclose their models within a block in order to facilitate this process (fig. 28); he takes a “yacht sailing” as his quintessential example; “now it is not possible to prop her up on dry land so as to draw her or photograph her, nor can she be made to hold still in the water in the position of sailing.” He thus suggested, “now the way to draw her is to enclose her in a simple brick shaped form, to give in mechanical drawing the proper tilts one at a time to the brick form, and finally to put the tilted brick into perspective and lop off the super-abounding parts.” A student could more easily negotiate the perspective of a regular geometric shape than an organic (if inanimate) form. For Eakins, mechanical drawing (fig. 29), which he addresses in the second half of the manual, isolated individual objects to depict them from three different views: from above, in profile, and from behind. In the case of a round-topped table, he encouraged the student to “follow the mind of the cabinet maker who constructed it.” And, further, he noted, “it is more rapid to draw a thing as the man has himself made it, that is in its own axes of construction, but it is also a more exact & natural way, the parts being rigidly connected, than to construct by separate & independent measurements from outside plans.” A mechanical drawing enabled the artist to appreciate and to draw an object as it was made rather than as it was seen.

For Eakins, then, drawing enabled one to reproduce (even to reconstruct) objects as they were designed rather than as they appeared. This imperative extended from actual objects to people (recall that learning to depict the human body was the goal of anatomical lectures and figure studies) to the canvases in which they were depicted. Eakins offered a series of

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94 A Drawing Manual, 55.
95 A Drawing Manual, 74.
96 A Drawing Manual, 76.
calculations and other measurements that the student might make or take in order to ensure the accuracy of his depictions. Harnett’s drawings of the *Borghese Warrior, Venus de Milo, and Sprig of Plums* certainly do not bear any “little squares” nor were the casts themselves ever enclosed within a box and, thereby, located on the page. But Harnett does appear to have deployed the parameters of the page itself to help him define the scale and proportions of the casts depicted upon it. He identified the midpoints of the casts and the pages and aligned them so as to guide his eye and his hand. The *Warrior*’s reach, both of his arm and leg, was then dictated by the parameters of the page (its upper left and lower right hand corners); the *Venus*’s perspective proceeded from the way her slab abutted the bottom edge of the page; and the leaves and fruit of the sprig of plums extended out from the center of the paper. In a vaguely mathematical manner explained by—if not actually borrowed from—Eakins, the drawings thus attended to, and even re-constructed, the physical structure of the casts themselves. They are concerned with quantifiable things like scale, proportion, size, and perspective, even if those are the very aspects of the drawn casts that often fall short: recall the *Warrior*’s awkwardly short arms and legs, and the *Venus*’s non-existent left foot. But these aberrations only attest to Harnett’s concerted efforts to depict, even replicate, the symmetry of the casts themselves. As he adjusted the casts to the page, Harnett used its parameters to lend precision to his own depiction of them such that the drawings became two-dimensional copies of the three-dimensional casts of the antique statuary on which they were based. He thus attempted to depict them as they had been designed rather than how they were seen or encountered. If Eakins made, used, and championed medical or scientific casts as a tool to understand human anatomy and, so, represent the body from the inside out, Harnett deployed drawing to analyze and re-create how classical casts themselves were made. He translated the mathematical principles and concerns that would
have attended the fabrication of them into two dimensions. The drawings thus read as plans or diagrams that might have preceded the casts as much as images made after them. They are attentive to the casts as things made of parts rather than organic, if artificial, wholes.

Yet, unlike the strictly linear illustrations in Eakins’s manual, Harnett used washes, chalks, and charcoal in addition to graphite to lend weight to his depiction of the casts. He shaded the entire 39 ½ x 34 inch sheet of paper traversed by the *Borghese Warrior* not to mention the cast itself; while the paper on which the *Venus de Milo* is drawn has not been shaded, its impeccably crisp silhouette suggests that Harnett rounded its perimeter with an eraser of some sort; and, as with *Borghese Warrior*, the entire sheet of *Sprig of Plums* has been shaded—in this case, to look like the planar stone to which the plums are attached. Harnett, then, not only coordinated the casts to the perimeter and parameters of the page, he also deployed and rendered the surface of the paper itself to help “construct” them. It was shaded, erased, and treated in order to help bring the casts into being and, in the process, acknowledged the paper itself as a material thing and made its status as a physical surface, in part, the subject of the drawing. If, in his sketchbooks, Harnett approached drawing as a kind of writing, it can be said that, in his academic studies, it proceeded as a form of sculpture. It was a way to give physical form to an object—both those on the page and, we might say, to the page itself. Harnett began his academic studies at a pivotal moment, when things like formalized instruction and public museums began to change how art was being made and seen. The materials used and the nature of the subjects depicted became of the utmost concern. In his drawings, Harnett reconciled them such that the paper and graphite came reconstitute (rather than merely represent) the casts in two dimensions. The graphite, washes, chalks, charcoal, and even eraser are used to exploit the plane of the paper and thus lend weight and even depth to the subjects depicted upon—and even embodied through—it. They
merge with, and emerge from, its surface in the manner of relief sculptures such that the material properties of the drawings are mobilized by Harnett as those of antique sculptures were beginning to be by places like the Metropolitan Museum of Art. His attempt to re-present the design of the casts in two dimensions thus invested his drawings with the kind of authorship endemic to the original sculptures and absent from the casts based on them. It, unwittingly or not, turned them into works of art, as they were coming to be defined by institutions like the modern museum. The physical paper and the material marks upon it witnessed and even indexed the actions used to represent the subjects that the drawings addressed.

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William Harnett was exposed to drawing as a means to an end. It was a fundamental practice in both the silver industry and the art academy, where it was used to reproduce works of art, be they ornaments or casts, in two dimensions in preparation for engraving or painting. As a skill, it enabled its practitioners to design or represent things on paper. The drawings that Harnett made within these two contexts suggest that, as he began to acquire or at least exercise it, this technical skill became an analytical one as well. In both his sketchbook and academic work, Harnett used drawing as a way to deconstruct as well as reconstruct how the ornaments and casts that he depicted had been created. He used marks on a page, in the case of his designs, and also its physical parameters, in the case of his academic studies, to dissect his subjects into their constituent parts (be they lines or limbs) and to manipulate them on the paper such that his drawings looked like they could even have been made in advance of, rather than after, the ornaments and casts that they represented. In order to do so—to pick apart and reconstitute these
subjects, Harnett mobilized the full materials or material properties of the resources at his disposal. Unlike the people responsible for the designs in E.C. Moore’s sketchbook, Harnett did not loosely sketch motifs in order to see what the object that they embellished might look like; rather, he meticulously placed and drew each line as well as each successive motif upon the page so as to render the forms themselves (not to mention the process by which they were tweaked and transformed) legible. Similarly, in his academic studies, Harnett sited his subjects according to the parameters of the page and used all sorts of media, from wash to charcoal to erasers, to treat the entire surface and mold the casts from it. In both cases, despite the different demands on ornaments and academic studies, Harnett conducted his analyses by way of the physical act of drawing. He harnessed the process of depicting ornaments and casts as well as the basic materials that it entailed in order to investigate and thus re-produce these things in two dimensions rather than on a two-dimensional plane. The sketches thus functioned like linguistic characters more than decorative flourishes, and the studies, like unique reproductions of the multiples on which they were based.

The drawings discussed in this chapter were not a mere blip within Harnett’s career; the sketchbook and academic studies were created over a three-year period and, so, represent only a third of the decade in which Harnett is known to have studied in art academies and worked in the silver industry. That is to say, he had extended experience with drawing before he turned to painting and, further, developed his own take on the practice, as indicated above, during that time. Yet, his work has been divorced from its origins in this medium. Instead, Harnett’s paintings, particularly those of utilitarian objects made later in his career, have been instrumentalized as social tools. But the sketchbook and academic studies that he produced before turning to them situate the paintings in a pictorial tradition and Harnett as an artist
invested within it, even as he reimagined its most fundamental strategies and subject. These drawings suggest that Harnett was versed in both ornament and classical statuary as well as trained in the technical skills required to render them. But they also reveal an artist who—even in this early phase of his career—was already, judging by the pictorial evidence, interested in the materiality of his subjects and media as well as their ability to represent man in his metaphysical aspect. Harnett reveled in the casts as objects and in the ornaments as designs and exploited the surface of the paper as well as the very act of depicting those things upon it. His drawings became a way to explore the tradition—the history and techniques—that he had inherited as a professional artist. The body and how things look proved less important to him than the means by which art, in all its forms, was made. It emerged as the product of design—of how things had been plotted in advance and then realized in material form. In his drawings, Harnett reconciled these distinct processes; the drawings and their subjects assumed material form as they were depicted on the page. He thus approached drawing as a practice not unlike writing or sculpting, whereby the acts of marking and making were inseparable from the material presence and thus the meaning of the things that they produced. As Harnett treated the page, be it with graphite and/or wash, the images that resulted—be they designs or figure studies—embodied the actions used to produce them. They did not illustrate cutlery or the body in motion, but witness the processes by which ornaments and casts were designed. Through his experiences in the silver industry and the art academy, then, Harnett was acquainted with the history and the practice of art and, more so, with the role of design in both of them. As he ventured into painting, this principle would inform both the subjects that Harnett took up and the strategies by which he depicted them such that painting, like drawing, writing, and cast-making if not sculpture per se, embraced and exploited the media and the means through which its “objects” were produced.
CHAPTER 2
PAINTING:  IN OTHER WORDS

In his articles about what it was like to study under Thomas Eakins at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Charles Bregler described the kind of exercises that the famed instructor recommended to his students: “paint a little piece of still-life, paint hard. A half an hour is worth more than a whole week of careless work.”; “take an egg or an orange, a piece of black cloth, and a white piece of paper, and try to get the light and color.”; “paint three eggs,—one red, one black, and one white. Paint the white and black ones first, then paint all three together.”\(^9\) Presumably, as also suggested by Maria Chamberlin-Hellman in *Thomas Eakins as a Teacher*, such directives were proffered in the context of the still-life painting class that Eakins began offering in 1882. Christian Schussele, his predecessor at PAFA, had instituted a similar course in the 1870s focused on drapery, but years later Eakins included the following request for a classroom in a note to the Board of Directors: “the director of the schools is very anxious to have a still life painting class where color and tone experiments may be made on a greater scale than the gray tones of the flesh afford in the life class room. Such a class was started last year in the dissecting room, but was crowded out on the arrival of the subjects.”\(^10\) For Eakins, as it had been for Schussele, still life was a means to learn and practice painting, and painting, as Eakins’s

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\(^10\) Maria Chamberlin-Hellman, *Thomas Eakins as a Teacher*, 266. Council minutes from the National Academy of Design, specifically from a meeting held on February 3, 1873, note that a class had just been established in which “students were engaged studying from still life,” suggesting that the practice of painting from objects was used at the school (whether or not still life in particular was taught there) as early as that year and possibly even sooner.
preferred egg exercise suggests, was concerned with color and, more specifically, rendering form by way of color. These classes established an integral relationship between painting and still life grounded in the depiction of light, tone, and shade.

However, when it came to annual exhibitions at another academy, the National Academy of Design, still life only accounted for seven or eight percent of all entries in the period of time that Harnett was a student there. In both 1870 and 1875, landscapes dominated by a wide margin, followed in a distant second by portraiture in 1870, which swapped places for third with genre scenes in 1875. That year, landscapes accounted for 195, and genre scenes for 116, out of 533 works. The annual exhibition just four years later, in which William Harnett also showed, included work by artists like landscape painter Thomas Moran (fig. 30) and genre painter Thomas Hovenden (fig. 31) as well as others whose paintings are not normally associated with our artist. However, these were the models, the examples, to which Harnett would have been privy as a student in the academy both in New York and in Philadelphia in the early 1870s. If still life exercises taught students how to work with paint, landscape and genre scenes demonstrated how paintings worked—what they could (and could not) represent, and the strategies by which this was accomplished. This chapter examines three groups of paintings and, more specifically, the transition from the first to the second two that raise questions about what Harnett understood a painting (rather than the practice of painting, which will be addressed in the next chapter) to be. In 1875, after taking classes at PAFA, NAD, as well as Cooper Union on and off for just over ten years, Harnett gave up engraving and fully turned his attention to painting. His earliest paintings consist of inanimate objects, like books and pipes, as well as feather quills and clay mugs, arranged on wooden or marble tabletops in amorphous, unidentifiable spaces. He

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102 Catalogue of the Fifty-Fourth Annual Exhibition of the National Academy of Design, 1879.
worked on these kinds of paintings—small canvases, oriented horizontally—for about four years, until leaving for Europe in 1880. There, he created paintings that bear no resemblance to the works that came before them, differing from them in every possible way. They render the canvas into a surface of wooden planks flanked by a dead animal or multiple animals accompanied by the hunting equipment by which they would have been captured. Harnett only made a handful of these later works, but they marked the most decisive shift in his career, introducing the pictorial feature that would define his mature work: a flat, wooden background coextensive with the picture plane, which was rotated ninety degrees (from his earlier works) to become vertical. His subjects thus shifted from inanimate to organic (if not quite animate), his backgrounds from deep (or at least shallow) to flat, and his canvases from horizontal to vertical. Harnett’s subjects, then, seem to be related to, if not dictated by, his interest in and divergent approaches towards, the canvas.

This chapter explores the significance of the canvas as a support and as a field of pictorial activity to Harnett’s early work; it asks what it meant for his first paintings to represent amorphous spaces, and for the picture plane to have been rotated and flattened in the works he made in Europe such that they brought about a decidedly different spatial effect. In order to do answer these questions, I draw on the pictorial models that would have been available to Harnett (and that are suggested by the subjects of his paintings) as a student in New York and Philadelphia and as an expatriate painter in Munich—a period in his career about which almost nothing is known, and from which only the paintings remain as primary documents. As discussed

earlier, Harnett’s time in the academy would have trained him in the technical practices of painting—like how to wield a brush and negotiate color, but almost none at all in how to conceive and execute a painting. He would have learned how to draw from models, but not how to choose and arrange them so as to produce an effective tableau. His paintings, however, tap into (if only to redeploy) the pictorial conventions and compositional strategies inherent to the genre paintings and landscapes on view in New York and Philadelphia and, later, the photographs and seventeenth-century Dutch and Flemish art circulating in Europe. This material can provide insight into the expectations, or at least understanding, that Harnett and his viewers brought to pictures and, more so, that they brought to pictures in distinction to texts. Each set of models, the ones that relate to Harnett’s first paintings and the ones that relate to those he created in Europe, bear distinct relationships to the written word and the printed page and, as much as the paintings themselves, these relationships can help explain what it would mean to paint books, letters, newspapers, and pipes on a horizontal canvas and dead game on a vertical one in the late-nineteenth century. Further, these pictorial models and their diverse relationships to text can help explain the connection that the three sets of work addressed in this chapter establish between the subject of a painting and the orientation of the canvas on which it was depicted.

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With incredibly rare exception, Harnett’s earliest paintings—those made between 1876, when he gave up engraving to paint professionally, and 1880, when he left for Europe, consist of a fairly regular coterie of inanimate objects. There are the old, weathered, and leather-bound

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104 See Chapter 1, “Drawing: The Making of….” in this dissertation for an extensive discussion of academic training in nineteenth-century America as well as references to the major sources on this topic.
books seen in *The Banker’s Table*, 1877 (fig. 32), *Still Life—Writing Table*, 1877 (fig. 33), and *Still Life with Letter to Thomas B. Clarke*, 1879 (fig. 34). A quill pen and ink well abound; they are included in such works as the aforementioned *Still Life with Letter to Thomas B. Clarke*, *Secretary’s Table*, 1879 (fig. 35), and *The Banker’s Table*. Those items are often accompanied by folded letters and/or mailed envelopes, like those in *Still Life—Writing Table* and *Still Life with Letter to Thomas B. Clarke*. Several of his paintings also picture money, like the folded bills and stacked coins in *The Banker’s Table* and the rolled bills in *Still Life—Writing Table*. Pipes are another staple of these paintings; no fewer than eight different varieties populate *The Social Club*, 1879 (fig. 36) and several of them re-appear individually in works like *A Man’s Table Reversed*, 1877 (fig. 37), *A Smoke Backstage*, 1877 (fig. 38), and *Still Life*, 1877 (fig. 39). They are often accompanied by tobacco, which is nestled within a rotund canister as in *Still Life* or a soft package, as in *A Smoke Backstage*, by new and used matches, and sometimes by crushed oyster crackers, which are strewn about the table in works like *A Man’s Table Reversed*. This is a fairly exhaustive list of the subjects that Harnett included in his early work—objects that were read, written, exchanged, smoked and imbibed.

These very sorts of activities were pictured in the genre paintings that, along with landscapes, dominated academy exhibitions in these years. In paintings like *Mississippi Boatman*, 1850 (fig. 40) and *Raftsmen Playing Cards*, 1847 (fig. 41), as well as *The Wood-Boat*, 1850 (fig. 42) and *Lighter Relieving the Steamboat Aground*, 1847 (fig. 43), George Caleb Bingham depicted men sailing and resting along the Mississippi River, passing the time smoking long white pipes. In works by Richard Caton Woodville, like *War News from Mexico*, 1848 (fig. 44) and *Politics at an Oyster House*, 1848 (fig. 45), reading newspapers occasions heated discussion. Art historian Elizabeth Johns has argued that these works, as well as others by artists like William Sydney
Mount and Lilly Martin Spencer, negotiated social tensions in mid-century—or, more specifically, antebellum—America. In *American Genre Painting: The Politics of Everyday Life*, she looks at the kind of people who were represented in these paintings, as well as the kind of people who bought them, in order to understand why genre painting pervaded the cultural landscape throughout the 1830s, 40s and 50s only to die out with the start of the Civil War. Ultimately, Johns claims that these paintings traffic in social types and, as such, “contributed to the sorting out of citizenship that was a major focus—some would say the fundamental concern—of public discussion.” Genre paintings characterized the American populace according to class, gender, and other social categories; they thus participated in the broader cultural impulse to codify an increasingly diverse population and, as such, appealed to patrons, their anxieties, and self-conceptions.

The way in which shipping magnate Robert Gilmor Jr. responded to his commission from William Sydney Mount certainly proves Johns’s point. But it also raises a question about the relationship between these types and the scenes in which they participate and thus the significance of objects, like pipes and newspapers, in early paintings by Harnett. In 1837, Gilmor asked Mount for a cabinet-sized picture on any subject; around six months later, he was sent *The Tough Story—Scene in a Country Tavern* (fig. 46). The painting depicts three men gathered around a stove in an otherwise desolate interior. Mount gleefully responded to a letter (now lost) from Gilmor:

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105 Elizabeth Johns, *American Genre Painting: The Politics of Everyday Life* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991). Johns’s account thoroughly details the ways in which genre paintings participated within the broader socio-cultural interest in characterizing and differentiating social types. It would be fascinating to think about how the paintings differed from manifestations of this impulse in print and speech. The study at hand suggests that this social imperative informed pictorial conventions at the time and, so, how artists like Harnett, who were trained in the years that genre painting flourished, would have understood the medium.

106 Johns, xiii.

I am happy to find with but a slight difference your impressions of my intentions are what I intended them. The man puffing out his smoke is a regular built Long Island tavern and store keeper, who amongst us is often a Gen. or Judge, or Post master, or what you please as regards standing in society, and as you say has quite the air of a Citizen. The man standing wrapped in his cloak is a traveler as you supposed, and is in no way connected with the rest, only waiting the arrival of the Stage—he appears to be listening to what the old man is saying. I designed the picture as a conversation piece. The principal interests to be centered in the old invalid who certainly talks with much zeal. 108

Presumably, Gilmor had attempted to categorize the people in the painting—as a pillar of the community, a commuter or tourist of sorts, and a loquacious, yet incapacitated old man. These characterizations seem apt; the seated man “puffing out his smoke” assumes a confident posture and has an authoritative air; the man standing behind him has his outerwear on and his back turned to the other two figures; and the older man leans forward on his chair, seemingly unaffected by his bandaged head and knee. Yet, the painting, as even Mount’s description would suggest, is much more than a portrayal and juxtaposition of individual figures; the Citizen, tourist, and old man are not depicted in isolation from one another, but engaged in a conversation, albeit in highly different fashions. The Citizen is listening to the invalid as the traveler eavesdrops in the background. The painting included several social types, but its subject was the physical and even sonic interaction between them.

As Mount’s patron, Gilmor—in keeping with Johns’s findings—certainly appears to have been interested in identifying the types within the painting. Yet, The Tough Story, like many genre scenes, found a much broader audience through reproduction. In 1840, Carey & Hart, publishers of The Gift, an annual publication of short stories and illustrations, became interested in the painting and, in contrast to Gilmor, in the story, rather than the people, that it depicted. They asked writer W.E. Burton to articulate its narrative, and he in turn wrote to Mount for more information:

108 Reprinted in Frankenstein, William Sydney Mount, 75-76.
Mr. Edward Carey has requested me to write a story in connection with your excellent picture, which he denominates ‘The Story Teller.’ I allude to that one wherein an old man is sitting in a bar room, near a stove, with his head bound up—an open-countenanced traveler is close by, and a man with a cloak is seen behind the stove. I feel assured that you had some definite meaning in the design, although Mr. Carey assures me that the wounded man is merely inflicting a long ‘yarn’ upon his listeners. I fancy that the bill about the Long Island Rail Road, which is seen affixed to the wall, had some relation to the story-teller’s narrative. The completeness and graphic nature of your designs in general forbids the idea of a want of purpose in the group in question. May I ask you the favor of your opinions on the subject?  

For Burton, Mount’s meticulous attention to detail suggested that the painting illustrated a specific story—one that occasioned but was not legible in the work. He understood objects like the bandages on the older man’s head, the traveler’s cloak, and the poster on the back wall as clues to the painting’s narrative. We do not know whether Mount replied to Burton’s entreaty, but five years later a story by popular author Seba Smith accompanied an engraving of *The Tough Story* by J.I. Pease. 

Seba Smith’s story, “The Tough Yarn,” establishes a relationship among the three types within the painting. The story originates in a bet between Doctor Snow and Major Grant, both of whom find themselves in a tavern in the “back towns of Maine” one cold November evening. Dr. Snow, familiar with the bar and its keeper, Jack Robinson, wagers Grant, who is desperate for company and entertainment while he awaits his stage, “that you may ask him the most direct simple question you please, and you shan’t get an answer from him under half an hour, and he shall keep talking a steady stream the whole time.” Grant accepts the challenge and sets to think of a question that will elicit a brief response; he rules out the weather and flip (the drink at hand) and lands on Robinson’s “lameness”—whether it was in his leg or his foot. His query prompts a

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110 Seba Smith, “The Tough Yarn,” in *Way Down East; or, Portraiture of Yankee Life* (New York: Derby & Jackson, 1859). This story first appeared in *The Gift* in 1842 or 1845 and was later reprinted in *Way Down East*, where it can be found today.
fifteen-page monologue by Robinson that meanders from a life lesson he learned from his father to the time he got caught in a water wheel to an incident in which a bear gnawed at, and later fell on, his foot. When he finally finishes, Grant unquestionably declares Snow the winner. Smith’s story, then, puts the three types into conversation—the traveler with the Citizen, and the Citizen with the invalid. As Burton had been inclined to do, Smith wove the story from the objects present within the painting: for example, the railroad bill indicated that travel was afoot, the stove, that it was winter. Further, the cup of flip in the older gentleman’s hand suggested loquaciousness, and the pipe held at length by the Citizen, his attention to the story being told. The small still life atop the stove around which all three of the men are huddled reiterates their respective roles in the conversation; the older gentleman appears to have traded a pipe for his cup of flip; the Citizen—his pipe for the cup of flip that he has set down; and the traveler is represented by the mug that hovers over both objects as Robinson does over Grant and Snow. The objects that the figures hold facilitate their verbal communication while the still life on the stove signals it. It is a synecdoche for the social and intellectual exchange between the three men.

Harnett’s early still lifes evacuate the people that populated genre paintings by artists like William Sydney Mount, Richard Caton Woodville, and George Caleb Bingham and leave only the objects that they would have once held. Previous scholars have taken those objects as clues to whom those absent individuals might be and have located the meaning of the works in their presumed identities. In Fool’s Gold, Meredith Davis extends the distinction, intimated by Wolfgang Born in 1947, between the tabletop still lifes that pertain to business and those that pertain to leisure activities; she argues that these two bodies of work represent the two kinds of men endemic to capitalist society: the professional and the flâneur—the producer and the
consumer, respectively.\footnote{Meredith Davis, \textit{Fool’s Gold: American Trompe L’Oeil Painting in the Gilded Age} (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 2005).} Johanna Drucker and Michael Leja suggest that the objects speak to specific individuals; Drucker argues that “Harnett’s bachelor paintings can be read both as instances of a formula and as highly particular studies, portraits revealing character through the choice of mug, pipe, and paper combination.”\footnote{Johanna Drucker, “Harnett, Haberle, and Peto: Visuality and Artifice among the Proto-Modern Americans,” \textit{The Art Bulletin} vol. 14, no. 1 (March 1992): 40.} Likewise, Michael Leja notes that, “Harnett’s paintings often provoked reflection on the person who might have owned or assembled the objects portrayed, whose character and life the order or disorder of the scene revealed, and whose touch produced the ‘rich effect’ the worn surfaces display.”\footnote{Michael Leja, “Touching Pictures by William Harnett,” \textit{Looking Askance: Skepticism and American Art from Eakins to Duchamp} (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2004), 141. By contrast, David Lubin has written that, “Harnett was a portraitist, not of people but of things—old things.” (\textit{Picturing a Nation}, 299).} Yet, read in relation to the genre paintings that preceded them, Harnett’s early still-life paintings are less significant for who they do not picture than for the objects that they do depict.

A painting like \textit{A Man’s Table Reversed} looks like the small still life atop the stove in \textit{The Tough Story}; a brown mug, folded newspaper, exhausted pipe, and mess of broken oyster crackers and matches sit atop a wooden table. In mid-century genre paintings like \textit{The Tough Story}, objects like these spoke to (and even established) the relationships among the social types portrayed. They generated the narrative content in these paintings, which—as in the case of Mount’s picture—was often \textit{about} a conversation. The objects—things like pipes and drink—thus facilitated and connoted the exchange of ideas, thoughts, or at least stories among men. In focusing on similar objects, Harnett’s early tabletop still-life paintings do not represent specific people or social types but the social interactions between them. They eliminate the physical...
circumstances for these interactions—the professional, domestic, and social contexts, as well as the bodies that enacted them. Instead, they picture the objects and, so, suggest the ephemeral and intangible conversations (be they written or verbal) that such objects engendered within the context of mid-century genre paintings.

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Each of Harnett’s early still-life paintings can be readily itemized. *Still Life* and *A Smoke Backstage* both contain a pipe, packaged tobacco, strewn matches and some form of text (a newspaper and a flyer, respectively). *The Banker’s Table* pictures two old books, an ink well and quill, a stamped and addressed envelope, as well as a stack of folded bills, a roll of coins, and a loose quarter and dime. *Secretary’s Table* includes a whole assortment of objects—from a quill pen, notepad, and pencil to a wax crayon and seal, a leather-bound box of blank envelopes from which one specimen has been removed and sealed, a letter-opener, and a candlestick holder. An even more diverse array of objects fills the only surviving painted study by Harnett (fig. 47): a meerschaum pipe, a small white porcelain vase, a turnip-like vegetable, a reddish apple or peach, and a small glass filled with a sliver of what appears to be whiskey. The canvas is divided into three vertical registers, but, even when the objects occupy the same one, each item appears as a distinct entity: the pipe hovers above the vase and turnip, which both sit in the second register, albeit ensconced within separate swathes of brown paint. The apple or peach and tumbler sit in the bottom register, which is traversed by a horizontal line; the fruit simply levitates above it, but it divides the wood table on which the tumbler sits from the mauve wall behind it. In the early horizontal still lifes that Harnett made around the time of this study, though, a marble or wooden
tabletop unifies the disparate objects into a cohesive, even casual scene. They are littered across its planar surface as things that have been, will be, or are being used.

The compositions of mid-century landscape paintings—which, along with genre scenes by artists like Mount, Bingham, and Woodville, dominated academic exhibitions in the 1860s and 70s—appeared equally as cohesive, but were also “collaged” together from multiple, distinct parts: in this case, specific views or geographic locations. In *Empire of the Eye: Landscape Representation and American Cultural Politics, 1825-1875*, art historian Angela Miller has assiduously demonstrated that artists like Jasper Cropsey, Asher B. Durand, and Frederic E. Church created “synthetic landscapes” from first-hand observations, which Miller argues mirrored the socio-political tension between local and national allegiances at the time on a formal level.114 Frederic Edwin Church’s *The Heart of the Andes* (fig. 48) is a particularly rich instance of this strategy and, as such, can offer useful insight into what it would mean for Harnett to arrange a series of objects into a unified tableau. *The Heart of the Andes* is based on oil studies, pencil drawings, and sketchbooks that Church executed during his two trips to South America in 1853 and 1857. In his study of the painting, curator Kevin J. Avery implies that, on his first trip, Church was primarily interested in the topography of the region—the peaks and breadth of the Andes, particularly Cotopaxi, a volcano nestled amongst them, which the artist would depict in paint in 1862. In fact, Avery goes so far as to suggest that Church returned to South America four years later in order to record the “lushness of the tropics” below them.115 On that trip, Church made drawings like *Study of a Large-leaved Plant (Xanthosoma)* (fig. 49), *A Sheet of Studies of Chimborazo* (fig. 50), *Composition with Effect Observed, Guaranda* (fig. 51),

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and *View of Pichincha Taken near the Hacienda Chillo* (fig. 52). Two years later, in 1859, and back in New York, Church combined his observations of the plant life in (what is today) Panama and Guayaquil, the mountain’s peak and cloud cover from Guaranda, and the atmosphere in Quito into a seamless depiction of the landscape surrounding the tallest peak in South America.

As his detailed sketches suggest, Church was interested in both the topography and the geology of the Andes. His travels to South America were inspired by *Cosmos: A Physical Description of the Universe*—the four-plus-volume publication by the German naturalist Alexander von Humboldt, which was based on the scientist’s own journey through the region between 1799 and 1804. In *Cosmos*, Humboldt hoped to offer a wholistic account of the world’s natural order—that is to say, to demonstrate how the subjects of fields as diverse as meteorology, botany, and mineralogy, to cite just a few disciplines, were all connected, related, and mutually constitutive. As he wrote to his backer, “my single true purpose is to investigate the confluence and interweaving of all physical forces.” He thus described, quantified, and analyzed data on weather, plants, and soil, amongst other phenomena, so as to understand the “dynamic equilibrium” within a single region. Humboldt identified the Andes as particularly ripe for such treatment given the range of climates, vegetation, and elevations that it encompassed. In “Church, Humboldt, and Darwin: The Tension and Harmony of Art and Science,” Stephen Jay Gould argued that Church was influenced not just by Humboldt’s

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116 Church’s relationship to Humboldt is addressed in Avery’s *Church’s Great Picture* as well as Stephen Jay Gould, “Church, Humboldt, and Darwin: The Tension and Harmony of Art and Science,” in *Frederic Edwin Church*, ed. Franklin Kelly, (Washington D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1989). Gould noted that Church held Humboldt’s writings in his personal library, although Gould was more concerned with the books that Church did not own, like Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*. He speculated that the absence of this seminal text from the artist’s personal library may have suggested Church’s discomfort with the contentious view of nature that Darwin (versus Humboldt) espoused.


118 Ibid.

119 Gould, 100.
travels—the specific course he took through South America—but also his “aesthetic philosophy” and his scientific vision—the notion that landscape painting was a means to learn about and understand nature and that nature exhibited “unity in diversity” or the harmonious interaction of multiple physical systems. Gould claimed that by combining his extensive sketches into one picture, Church represented in paint what Humboldt had articulated in his text: the dynamic equilibrium within the environment around Chimborazo. The painting thus pictured both the appearance, but also the physics of the landscape.

At least two guides were written and published to accompany the exhibition of The Heart of the Andes. Louis Noble’s Church’s Painting: The Heart of the Andes and Theodore Winthrop’s A Companion to the Heart of the Andes walked the reader-viewer through the painting, highlighting and describing successive parts of the picture as though it were the actual landscape. Noble situates the viewer as follows: “imagine yourself, late in the afternoon with the sun behind you, to be traveling up the valley along the bank of a river, at an elevation above the hot country of some five or six thousand feet.” He, the viewer, is thus to see himself on the craggy precipice in the lower right-hand corner of the painting. His attention is then called towards the stream, the mountains, and the sky—towards the things that he, walking through the landscape, would see: the lush trees and bushes, the warm light, the fickle clouds. Noble describes them as though they were actual natural phenomena, thereby further testifying to the scientific accuracy of the work—a quality that he considered the benchmark and foundation of any landscape painting. Likewise, Theodore Winthrop divides The Heart of the Andes into ten regions; “The Sky; The Snow Dome; The Llano, or central plain; The Cordillera; The Clouds,

122 Noble, 9.
their shadows and atmosphere; The Hamlet; The Montana, or central forest; The Cataract and its Basin; The Glade on the right foreground; The Road and left foreground.” He describes each region in minute, even excessive, detail (at forty-three pages, his tract almost doubles Noble’s in length) as he, too, guides the viewer, albeit along a different path, from the top of the painting to the bottom, from the background to the foreground. These pamphlets suggest that Church not only re-created the geology of the Andes; he also offered the viewer the opportunity to vicariously experience his journey through them. Avery emphasizes that Church’s trip, his sketches, and the painting based on them encompassed approximately 167 miles that traverse modern-day Ecuador and Colombia. Thus, he, too, suggests that “it becomes evident that The Heart of the Andes does not merely fuse widely separated local environments but characterizes Church’s expedition through them.” Each individual sketch may represent a distinct ecological phenomenon, but by combining them in a painting, Church represents the experience of the landscape as a whole.

Frederic Church combined sketches from multiple different viewpoints, regions, and even trips to create The Heart of the Andes, a painting that ostensibly depicts the immediate landscape around the tallest mountain in South America. The individual sketches—of plants, clouds, trees, and neighboring peaks—were rendered with scientific accuracy and precision, but the painting as a whole imaginatively reconstructed both the physics of the landscape as well as the artist’s very

123 Winthrop, 13.
124 Avery, 25. The way that the painting was displayed further suggests that the installation was intended to enable the visitor to experience the view as though it were her or his own. The nearly 5 ft. x 9 ft. painting was meant to be a Great Picture—a work that could be displayed as an independent attraction, liberated from the multiple physical constraints of academic exhibitions. A free-standing black walnut frame was created for the occasion, and, as Avery notes, was intended “to create the impression of a window casement of Renaissance-Revival style through which the viewer would peer into the picture as though it were a real, not a painted landscape” (34). He notes that its horizon line was thus suited to an “average-size adult” (34), and that the painting was lit from a skylight so that the work itself appeared to be the source of illumination in the otherwise empty room. The painting was thus to appear like a landscape glimpsed through a window; visitors were even encouraged to look at it through opera glasses to heighten this effect. For more on the exhibition of The Heart of the Andes, see Kevin J. Avery, “The Heart of the Andes Exhibited: Frederic E. Church’s Window on the Equatorial World,” American Art Journal 18, no. 1 (Winter, 1986), 52-72.
journey through it. As Church located and organized the subjects of the sketches on the canvas, the painting thus came to represent the physical and temporal relationship between them. In The Heart of the Andes, the surface of the canvas enables Church to establish the topographical and geological relationship between his sketches of distinct aspects of the landscape. It unifies them so as to demonstrate and even recreate the physics and physical experience of the region. The individual parts of the landscape and of his journey can thus be read against, and in relation to, each another. In Harnett’s early still-life paintings, the tabletop serves the same purpose that the canvas and frame do in The Heart of the Andes. It brings the discrete or distinct objects into dialogue and enables them to be thought together; as such, they come to evoke the activities in which these objects participate, much as the elements of Church’s landscape evoke Humboldtian ecosystems. The pencil, quill, wax crayon, and letter-opener in Secretary’s Table evoke the process by which envelopes like those in the box and the one underneath the notepad are filled with notes, addressed, sealed, and opened. The books, letter and envelope, and newspaper in Still Life with Letter to Thomas B. Clarke are all texts that suggest the process of reading; and the paraphernalia in A Smoke Backstage, Still Life, and A Man’s Table Reversed speak to smoking. If the individual objects in these painting speak to the exchange of ideas, the combinations into which they are placed suggest the processes by which such exchanges happen: activities like reading and writing, smoking and counting. In unison, on the tabletop, the objects represent the tools and thus the stages in by which these processes are carried out and, thereby, witness how ideas are generated, articulated, and circulated. As in Church’s picture, the juxtaposition of discrete and distinct entities on a flat plane elicits the physical as well as conceptual processes that connect them.
While the marble and wooden table tops situate the objects in space, the actual place that they inhabit cannot be identified. With rare exception, the background of Harnett’s early still-life paintings is an amorphous expanse of brownish tannish paint. There are no chips or cracks to mark it as a material surface, no seams to suggest a corner or abutting walls. The paint simply fades from a deep black in the upper left-hand corner to a lighter yellowy shade in the upper right as though the models were subject to a light source not pictured “on screen.” This anonymous background is present in both the “smoking” paintings like A Man’s Table Reversed and A Smoke Backstage, as well as the more explicitly literary works like The Banker’s Table and Secretary’s Table, and it contrasts markedly with the specificity of certain objects that are pictured within it. The tobacco-filled box at the center of The Social Club is marked with the kind of cigars that it once contained (Colorado Maduro) and the brand that produced them—an outfit in Havana. The eponymous letter in Still Life with Letter to Thomas B. Clarke is inscribed with its recipient’s New York address (203 W44th St, New York, NY), the newspaper is the June 11, 1879 New York Times, and the books are by William Shakespeare and either Walt Whitman or, as some believe, poet John Greenleaf Whittier.125 “… June 26 See Mr. Clarke at St. George Hotel,” reads the note in Secretary’s Table. And, the playbill peaking out from underneath the soft package in A Smoke Backstage contains the phrase “of Denmark,” presumably a reference to Hamlet. Marked with names and dates, these objects inscribe text into the pictures. Unlike William Sydney Mount and Frederic Church, who had authors like Seba Smith, Louis Noble and Theodore Winthrop, to pen actual guides to their work, Harnett’s paintings were not

accompanied by narrative exegeses. No stories or brochures were published in connection with them. However, all of his early paintings include readily legible wording in some form or another, which suggests a relationship to text and the verbal that is as significant if more literal as well as visual than the one maintained by the work of Church and Mount.

Yet, none of these texts is wholly decipherable: the name of the company that makes the cigars that once filled the box in *The Social Club*; the title of the newspaper, names of the authors, and text of the letter in *Still Life with Letter to Thomas B. Clarke*; the words that have been erased above the legible part of the note in *Secretary’s Table*; nor the majority of the flyer in *A Smoke Backstage*. The identity of the specific objects, their content, and authors are less important than the act of reading that these texts engender. Scholars have noted the profusion of text-based objects in Harnett’s work—the books and letters, for example—but the fact that these objects prompt the viewer to actually read the paintings has not been noted. In discussing the profusion of literary material in Harnett’s paintings, John Wilmerding, Laura Coyle, and Robert Chirico have all discussed the dramatic increase in literacy among a more broadly based American public in the late-nineteenth century. For his part, Chirico attributes this development to the Puritan emphasis on the word over the image as well as Thomas Jefferson’s support of education. But these influences could be said to have been present in American society for years before Harnett’s day; Jefferson himself had passed away in 1826. The years 1840-1880, however, witnessed seismic changes in both public education and publishing. As

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126 See, for example, Judy L. Larson “Literary References in Harnett’s Still-Life Paintings,” in *William M. Harnett* as well as the sources cited below.
128 Chirico, 113.
Scott E. Casper notes in *A History of the Book in America*, according to census data, in the decades between 1840 and 1880, the number of students enrolled in public schools grew from just under 2,000,000 to about 10,000,000; they were attending the bevy of new schools that had been set up in the Midwest and California, as well as the South. Further, these years mark the rise of the “industrial book,” or books that were made entirely by machine—from the production of the paper to the printing of the text and the binding of the final product. Publishing became a veritable (not to mention a profitable) industry, orchestrated by editors at houses like G.P. Putnam & Co., Harper & Brothers, and Ticknor and Fields, amongst others. These publishers unleashed a torrent of eclectic reading material into the public sphere, from classics to dime novels, which libraries and cheap editions made available to an ever-broader and more diverse public.\(^{129}\)

By the early 1870s, then, when Harnett was working on paintings like *Secretary’s Table* and *Still Life with Letter to Thomas B. Clarke*, reading had become a common practice.\(^{130}\) While many embraced its political and social potential to inform, unite, and engage those marginalized on the basis of gender, race, or class, others feared its deleterious effects on the individual and society more broadly. As Barbara Sicherman writes in “Ideologies and Practices of Reading,”


\(^{130}\) In addition to his artistic investment in reading as a pictorial strategy, Harnett appears to have been personally invested in the burgeoning practice. He was a member of the Catholic Philopatric Literary Institute, which Judy Larson points out “gave him access to a circulating library of books on topics ranging from theology and politics” (265), and his estate sale included no fewer than thirty books—more likely models for his paintings than a personal library. Amongst them was a Spanish edition of Don Quixote (likely that seen in works like *The Old Cupboard Door*), a Latin version of *Flowers of the Illustrious Poets*, and something listed as “Old Latin Book,” which the catalogue notes was “a favorite model” (24). Harnett’s paintings demonstrate his familiarity with an even broader range of authors, both contemporary and historical, as well as genres, from fiction to poetry. One of his most frequent references, for example, is Shakespeare, who is the focus of *Bard of Avon*, in which the playwright appears as a sculpture bust atop two volumes of his work. Hamlet comes up in *A Smoke Backstage*, where the visible portion of the flyer reads “of Denmark,” and a choice quote from the play is inscribed on the inside cover of the frayed book in *Memento Mori—To This Favour*: “Now get thee to my lady’s chamber, and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favour she must come.” Whether or not Harnett read all of the books that he depicted in his paintings, they suggest his familiarity (if not personal acquaintance) with the literary canon.
“clergymen, educators, and other cultural authorities voiced alarm at the dangerous conjunction of suspect new forms of print with mass consumption.” 131 In keeping with the nineteenth-century penchant for manuals, an entire discourse emerged to negotiate this concern: Courses of Reading that recommended specific titles to be read. 132 One by a Dr. Johnson, for example, suggested everything from Rollins’s *Ancient History* to Watts’ *Improvement of Mind* and England’s *Gazetteer*. 133 In response to such prescriptive guidebooks, Noah Porter, Professor of Moral Philosophy and Metaphysics as well as the editor of *Webster’s Dictionary*, published *Books and Reading: What Books Shall I Read, and How Shall I Read Them?*, which came out in the first year of his tumultuous tenure as president of Yale College. 134 Rather than an arbitrary and provisional list of books, *Books and Reading* was a practical primer on its eponymous subjects for the average person (though Porter did acquiesce and recommend some titles in an appendix). In it, Porter aimed to teach readers how to discriminate between the plethora of books on the market as well as how to use them to the best effect, which he defined in Christian terms. He wanted to explain the nature and purpose of books; as such, *Books and Reading* provides useful insight into what it meant for Harnett to treat his viewers as readers, and to represent his subjects as legible texts.

In his introduction, Porter suggests that *Books and Reading* was written in response to the common confusion over what to read and how to read. But throughout the book, a deeper concern with the influence of books emerges. He implies, or at times even explicitly states, that

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they impact their readers. There are ways to read such that books “may cause it [reading] to yield pure and exquisite delight, to add power to the intellect, and to impart a grace and finish to the character and life.” 135 Reading could and even should alter how one feels, what one knows, and how one sees. Porter proclaims that “…literature in most of its forms, is chiefly valuable for what it does for the imagination by enlarging its range, elevating its ideals, stimulating its aims, and purifying and ennobling its associations.” 136 It expands and informs the imagination, which Porter explicitly links to morality. Books represent a range of opinions, behaviors, and beliefs; in them, truth is “recast and used to interpret nature or direct the life.” 137 Through plot, characters, and tone, they offer models of thought and actions that the reader should, according to Porter, use to guide his own “feelings and thoughts,” as he oft repeats. 138 Yet, differences in age and training, for example, may mean that books effective and beneficial for one person may have an adverse effect on another, and each should regulate their reading based on what works for them. Thus, through reading will one attain self-knowledge, its ultimate goal: “if the genius of a man lies in the development of the individual person that he is, his manhood lies in finding out by self-study what he is and what he may become, and in wisely using the means that are fitted to form and perfect his individuality.” 139

135 Porter, 9.
136 Porter, 80.
137 Porter, 96.
138 See, for example, Porter, 254.
139 Porter, 14. In its goal of self-actualization, Porter’s Books and Reading adhered to a disintegrating model of culture that understood things like literature as a means of personal development (on “self-culture” see, for example, Richard F. Teichgraeber III, Building Culture: Studies in the Intellectual History of Industrializing America, 1867-1910 (Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 2010). With the founding of public museums and libraries, for example, cultural pursuits would increasingly be framed and understood as ways to define distinct populations, often against one another, as discussed by Lawrence Levine in Highbrow/Lowbrow. Harnett’s paintings stand at the overlap of these two models, as one dissolved and the other took hold; they facilitate a mutually constitutive exchange between individuals (namely, the artist and the viewer) across or, better, via the canvas.
Given the grave responsibility with which books are charged, Porter advises that they be selected “with a more jealous care than we choose our friends and intimates.” Further, he suggests that they be chosen as though they were friends and intimates. Books “should be regarded and judged somewhat as a man himself is tried and estimated.” By this he means that they should be selected according to the personality that they express and even represent, which is that of their author. Porter begins his tract by demystifying books; they should not be considered authoritative simply by virtue of their existence—rather, they are the creation of fallible human beings. Just as one is selective about the people with whom one talks, so he should be selective in the material one reads—more so, claims Porter, because writing gives one the opportunity to revise. The writer can reflect on and change what has been written so it expresses exactly what is intended or hoped. Porter thus writes, “it follows from this [the nature of revision], that a book does not merely represent its author, but it represents the best part of him—or, it may be, the worst.” In *Getting at the Author*, literary scholar Barbara Hochman suggests that “reading for the author” was the defining interpretive convention of nineteenth-century literature; the author was what people looked for as they read. He was, as Porter suggests, located in specific characters (his “private opinions” and “individual feelings” were revealed in their impassioned speeches), but also in how the characters and plots were constructed (the sympathies and judgments that they suggest) and, as Hochman asserts, the rhetoric used. “This way of reading [for an author],” she writes, “was reinforced by rhetorical strategies, particularly the use of a narrator whom the reader, often addressed as ‘you,’ was

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140 Porter, 8.
141 Porter, 37.
142 Porter, 22.
144 Porter, 24.
encouraged to associate with the author of the work—a real, sometimes biographically concrete person, and always a writer and storyteller.”  

A book was thus a kind of mouthpiece or even surrogate for its author; he (and according to Porter, his values) spoke through it—its characters, plot, and tone.

By extension, reading a book was framed as a form of communication. Drawing on manuals like *Books and Reading*, Hochman suggests that books were understood to be like readers’ “friends,” and reading as “a kind of conversation.” She writes that, “an author’s character, presumed to be implicit in his or her book, could give reading the feel of a reciprocal exchange—a virtual relationship of sorts.”  

*Getting at the Author* describes the dissolution of these conventions—narrating and conversing—and the triumph of realism, characterized by “authorial self-effacement” in the face of anxiety over an increasingly diverse and demanding readership. Porter, however, seems to envision the act of reading as less of a dialogue and more of an occupation:

> When we set ourselves to read a book, what do we do? We place ourselves in communication with a living man. We go back with him to the time we he penned the volume. We think over the thoughts which he then thought, we sympathize with the feelings which he experienced, we behold the wondrous creations which his eye, ‘in the fine frenzy rolling,’ saw enter his door and live and move about him—the men and women, or the spirits of heaven and hell, to which he gave being in his mind then, and which he re-creates in our minds now.  

He often calls reading “conversing,” but describes it as re-living the thinking—and perhaps even the writing—by which a story, a work of fiction, was created. Of the Bard of Avon, Porter writes, “Shakespeare lets loose upon us a host of beings, the most wonderful that were ever

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145 Hochman, 2.  
146 Ibid.  
147 Ibid.  
148 Hochman, 1.  
149 Porter, 20.  
150 Porter, 29.
created by a human fancy, or that can be gazed upon by the ‘mind’s eye’ of the re-creating reader [my emphasis].”\textsuperscript{151} To read was to inhabit the author’s mind (and perhaps even soul) as he wrote, hence, Porter’s anxiety over whom to read. Reading was no less than submitting oneself to an author’s state of mind as he wrote; one had to “think with the author, rethinking his thoughts, following his facts, assenting to or rejecting his reasonings, and entering into the very spirit of his emotions and purposes.”\textsuperscript{152} It required re-living and appreciating or at least going along with the decisions made throughout the creative process and was thus a kind of psychic communion or even telepathic conversation.

Harnett’s early still-life paintings picture the products of many different kinds of authors. \textit{Still Life with Letter to Thomas B. Clarke} alone includes a newspaper, a novel or a play and poetry, as well as the hand-written letter referenced in the work’s title. These texts were made by a bevy of journalists for public consumption; a lone “genius” for a self-selecting audience; and by one person for another in particular, respectively. Yet, on none of these objects is the specific writer actually named: we know which outfit published the paper and when, that the books are by specific people—one whose name starts with “Whit,” and another whose name ends in “eare,” as well as the recipient, Thomas B. Clarke, esq., of the envelope and letter. Harnett obfuscates and undermines the identity of these authors even as he hints at them. The objects themselves—rather than the contents within them—become texts that can be and are read. The masthead of the newspaper, the address upon the envelope, and the spines of the books supersede any news, information, and ideas contained within them.

As such, the original authors of those texts—the journalists, professional writers, and private citizens—are subsumed within the technical, even literary, process by which the masthead,
address, and spine were realized. The subjects of the painting register less as entities filled with stories than as objects that have been written, printed, and bound. The ink well sitting atop the books and the quill pen resting against them only heighten this allusion to writing, publishing, and reading. Aligned with one of the black striations in the white marble tabletop upon which all of the objects rest, the quill further suggests that the table and thus the other objects in the painting are things that have also been rendered by way of a writing-like process, namely painting. Harnett scrawled Thomas B. Clarke’s address on the envelope, not to mention the words on the paper once contained by it, with paint and brush just as Clarke’s interlocutor would have done in actuality with the kind of pen and ink visible within the work. The painting was thus created by a similar process, if different means, than the texts pictured within it: by way of marks on a surface—best exemplified by the specific words, like “ork Times,” in which the painting and the texts in fact coalesce. Inscribed upon the surface of the canvas, the masthead, address, and spines are read as the stories within them would have been. These paintings, then, that picture objects that facilitate an exchange of ideas and that picture the processes of reading and writing and the rituals in which they occur, also stimulate and represent this activity. The amorphous backgrounds—usually brownish, but in the case of Still Life with Letter to Thomas B. Clarke, a deep black—thus evoke the shared intellectual space between reader and writer described by Hochman on the basis of works like Porter’s manual. In this manner, Harnett’s early paintings do not picture actual, physical places—an office or a study, a den or a parlor—but the intellectual realm that the activities pursued therein (the experience of reading and the process of writing something to be read) would access.

As he started his career as a professional painter, Harnett’s models were the genre scenes and landscape paintings that dominated academic exhibitions and defined pictorial standards and
conventions in these years. Works by artists like William Sydney Mount and Frederic Church attempted to depict the activities and the sites that constitute the physical, visible world. They created or rather re-created entire worlds and places within the canvas. The insufficiency of painting to this task was evidenced by the written brochures that were often produced to accompany such works. These texts explained the relationship between the elements in the painting—be they people or places; they articulated the event that occasioned their juxtaposition on canvas. In his early paintings, Harnett drew on the pictorial conventions exhibited by these works: the understanding of objects as conduits to written or verbal communication and the idea that a painting could be composed so as to simulate a temporal, ephemeral process. But he also appears to have been influenced, or at least challenged, whether consciously or not, by the texts required to explain them. In these works, Harnett used objects, space, and texts in order to make his paintings themselves legible. If Mount and Church deployed these strategies so as to illustrate a conversation and an experience, which—nonetheless—required a textual supplement in order to explain the activities that constituted them, Harnett redeployed those strategies so as to represent conversation or verbal experience itself. He pictured and juxtaposed inanimate objects associated with the various stages or means of reading, writing, and their corollaries in unidentifiable, amorphous spaces such that his paintings could—like the books, newspapers, and letters within them—be read and, further, be read in the mode in which reading was practiced in the period. Reading the truncated names and dates that litter these early works granted the viewer access to the intellectual realm from which the texts that they graced emerged. As such, the objects were not mere synecdoche for the idea of conversation, nor did the works allude to or evoke dynamics that happened “off screen” and could not be pictured; rather, the writing on the
books, letters, newspapers, and the like attempted to transform the painting itself into a text-like thing that embodied the cognitive dimension in paint on canvas.

Part 2

In 1880, like so many American artists before him, Harnett left for Europe, where it appears he hoped to continue the academic education he had begun in Philadelphia and New York. After brief stays in London and Frankfurt, where he was in the service of a private patron, Harnett settled in Munich, where he lived for the next four years or so. He arrived there just as William Merritt Chase and Frank Duveneck, American artists who had helped establish that city’s reputation as a viable, affordable alternative to Paris and London, were leaving for the United States and Italy, respectively. The circle around those artists dissolved with their departure, and Harnett does not appear to have been part of an extended ex patrio milieu. Nor was he embraced by the academy; Harnett applied to, and was rejected from, the Akademie der Bildenden Kunste, but went on to show with the independent Kunstverein.\(^{153}\) Nothing else is known of his time in Munich—his friends, his colleagues or activities. But he stayed there for approximately four years, during which time the city was in the midst of an art boom.\(^{154}\) Harnett continued to

\(^{153}\) On his way back to the United States, Harnett briefly resided in Paris and London, where he had also lived for a few months before heading to Frankfurt in the early 1880s. In 1885, he participated in the Salon in Paris and the annual exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts in London, but little else (except the addresses where he resided and the works that he produced there) is known about his time in these cities either.


For insight into the relationship between German and American artists in this period, see: Katharina and Gerhard Bott, eds., *ViceVersa: Deutsche Maler in Amerika Amerikanische Maler in Deutschland, 1813-1913* (Munich: Hirmer Verlag, 1996); Christian Fuhrmeister, Hubertus Kohle, and Veerle Thielemans, eds., *American Artists in
produce small—in fact, smaller—still life paintings of objects arrayed upon tabletops, still involving newspapers whose mastheads could be read, as well as amber pipes and clay jugs, but also more organic things, like onions, grapes, apples, and peaches. These works “zoomed out” to reveal more of the table and the room in which these objects were situated than did the paintings Harnett had created in the States, and they anticipate the composition of the tabletop still lifes he would make later in his career. But much of Harnett’s time and success in Europe was lavished on an entirely different kind of still life—within his oeuvre, if not within art history more broadly: paintings of dead game and, at times, hunting equipment hanging against planks of wood coextensive with the surface of the canvas.

These works were a real departure for Harnett. His earliest still-life paintings pictured inanimate objects in amorphous spaces on horizontal canvases. In Europe his work changed dramatically: the literary objects were replaced by dead game, which was later joined by physical tools; the amorphous spaces gave way to planar walls and doors; and the canvas was shifted ninety degrees, from horizontal to vertical. Each of these bold changes would be noteworthy on its own; the fact that they were instituted at the same time suggests that there was a distinct and shared purpose driving them. Further, although Harnett made relatively few of these works and was only engaged with these subjects for a short time, they introduced the wooden background that became the defining characteristic of his mature work. In contrast to the earlier paintings with their suggested depth, these later ones are remarkable for their planarity. The background consists of two to four vertical planks, most often painted a deep Hunter green. In *Trophy of the Hunt*, 1885 (fig. 53), *For Sunday’s Dinner*, 1888 (fig. 54), as well as all of the *After the Hunt* paintings, 1883-85 (figs. 1, 55-57), decorative hinges traverse the planks near the bottom and top.
of the canvas. *Trophy of the Hunt* also includes a door-knocker, while the background in *For Sunday’s Dinner* bears a keyplate, as do all of the *After the Hunts. Plucked Clean*, 1882 (fig. 58) and *Merganser Duck*, 1883, the earliest game paintings, are the barest; the rooster and duck rest against planks that cannot be identified as walls or doors or located inside or outside. They most emphatically dramatize the way in which the wooden background transforms the picture plane into (or rather highlights its status as) a physical, material surface.

Scholars have long noted a resemblance between Harnett’s game paintings, specifically the *After the Hunts*, and photographs by Adolphe Braun (figs. 59-60). Braun’s photographs also picture hunting equipment, but primarily dead game and foliage against a large wooden board with visible grain. He created at least eight variations on this theme, which were sold through his firm, Braun et Cie, in Dornach, Switzerland—then the largest manufacturer of art reproductions in the world. In his discussion of the relationship between Harnett’s work and photography, Douglas Nickel is careful to note that the artist did not paint from these photographs, but that they “must have prompted his selection of elements and his compositional strategies.”

Further, he suggests that the level of detail that the photographs captured may have served as a “technical challenge” for the artist—one to meet and possibly even exceed. Similarly, in her discussion of *After the Hunt*, also in the *William M. Harnett* catalogue, Elizabeth Jane Connell writes that;

…compositions of groups of small game, birds, or waterfowl, hanging alone or in tandem with hunting gear, culinary paraphernalia, and bric-a-brac, were a specialty of nineteenth-century photographs... Braun’s game pieces most closely

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157 Ibid.
approximate Harnett’s *After the Hunt* pictures in their grandeur of conception and scale and in their remarkable similarity of subject and composition.\(^{158}\)

Even Alfred Frankenstein noted the resemblance (if not direct inspiration) of Braun’s work;

> It is quite impossible to believe that when Harnett painted this picture, and the fourth, largest and most celebrated version of *After the Hunt* which he exhibited at the Paris Salon two years later, he did not have before him some or all of the game pieces produced about 1860 by the Alsatian photographer Adolphe Braun.\(^{159}\)

Frankenstein goes on to draw numerous parallels between the individual objects in Harnett’s paintings and those in Braun’s photographs, but notes that “what counts here is not so much the specific motif employed as the composition, the arrangement, the pictorial idea, and there is complete consistency here between Harnett and his fellow painters and the photographer who long preceded them.”\(^{160}\) Frankenstein and Connell, like Nickel, draw a comparison between the subjects and compositions of Harnett’s work and Braun’s photographs. Yet, these comparisons overlook the most fundamental similarity between these two bodies of work: a flat background coextensive with the picture plane, which was unlike anything seen in the paintings on display in New York and Philadelphia at the time. Although this pictorial convention goes back to seventeenth-century Dutch painting, if not even further, its significance in a work of the late-nineteenth-century can be explained by recourse to a different contemporaneous photographic project that sought to exploit the ways in which a printed page could be used to make information available to view.


\(^{160}\) Frankenstein, 67.
This strategy—of picturing animals against a flat plane—was the very foundation of the motion studies that Eadweard Muybridge conducted in the United States throughout the 1870s and 80s. Muybridge was already an established landscape photographer, well-known and admired for his views of the Yosemite Valley, when he was enlisted by Leland Stanford, the former governor of California and president of the Central Pacific Railroad, to photograph his horse Occident. Stanford raised and raced horses, and wanted to understand how they moved in order to improve how they were trained. Based on his own observations, the politician and businessman formulated the hypothesis that at some point all four of a horse’s hooves left the ground.\textsuperscript{161} He tried and failed to prove his theory by such purely ocular means as studying its footprints and, so, asked Muybridge to take a photograph “while the horse was at full speed”\textsuperscript{162} so as to picture the action as it was rather than as it was seen.

To be sure, this interest in photographing a subject that moves was not new. By the early 1870s, when Stanford commissioned Muybridge, the instantaneous photography “movement,” as historian Phillip Prodger refers to it, had already been in full swing for several decades—although that does not mean practitioners or anyone else had a clear understanding or definition of what it was. According to Prodger, the phrase “instantaneous photography” was alternately applied to the duration of an exposure, to the “naturalism” or clarity of a photograph, and to certain subjects—namely, those capable of movement. The later category included everything but still life subjects, anything from studio portraits to landscapes, primarily marine views and street scenes—pictures like Henry Peach Robinson and Nelson King Cherritt’s \textit{The Beached}.

\textsuperscript{162} [Eadweard Muybridge], “Leland Stanford’s Gift to Art and to Science: Mr. Muybridge’s Inventions of Instant Photography and of the Marvelous Zoogyroscope,” \textit{The Daily Examiner}, February 6, 1881, p. 3.
Margent of the Sea, 31 May 1870 (fig. 61) and Charles Negre’s Fall or Death of a Horse, Quai Bourbon (fig. 62). These photographs represent the ocean and the street, respectively, and happen to capture the spontaneous events that take place within them—the crash of the waves and the collapse of a cart. Prodger asserts that even when human activities or animals were the focus, they were staged or slowed for the camera; Oscar Gustave Rejlander and Andre-Adolphe-Eugene Disderi used invisible wires to create photographs of men “juggling” (fig. 63), and Frank Haes exhausted the animals at the London Zoological Gardens before endeavoring to photograph them.¹⁶³ By contrast, Muybridge was not just to photograph an animate or organic subject, but a horse as it moved. He was not supposed to stop motion so much as to depict it.

Much attention has, rightfully, been lavished on the particular strategies and apparatuses that Muybridge developed in order to meet this challenge: lateral photography and means by which to produce serial photographs.¹⁶⁴ But equally important is the setting in which he deployed them. Muybridge’s first attempt to photograph Occident, which was not published and no evidence of which remains, is thought to have taken place at the Sacramento racetrack in 1872. Five years later, when he returned to the project after having been acquitted of murdering his wife’s lover, Muybridge constructed an entire studio on Leland Stanford’s private track in Palo Alto.¹⁶⁵ True to his first efforts, the horse would be photographed from a building parallel to the track such that the horse ran past the camera rather than towards or away from it. But, instead of just one

¹⁶⁴ See, for example, Prodger, Time Stands Still and Mozley, Eadweard Muybridge’s Complete Human and Animal Locomotion.
¹⁶⁵ Muybridge’s photographic work for Leland Stanford served as the basis for the drawings in the following study: Stillman, Dr. J.D.B. The Horse in Motion as Shown by Instantaneous Photography with a Study on Animal Mechanics Founded on Anatomy and the Revelations of the Camera in which is Demonstrated the Theory of Quadruped Locomotion. Boston: James R. Osgood and Company under the auspices of Leland Stanford, 1882. Perceiving that publication and the limited use of his photographs within it as well as the minimal credit he received for his participation in the project, Muybridge self-published a book of the photographs under the title The Attitudes of Animals in Motion that same year.
camera, Muybridge now set up a battery of twelve cameras that were all twenty-one inches apart. At first, the battery was activated by “a machine...constructed on the principle of a Swiss music-box,” but the machine proved difficult to coordinate with the horse’s gait and so it was replaced by a series of wires that were placed along the track and connected to the cameras. As the horse proceeded, it tripped them off, successively releasing the shutters. In order to better the lighting conditions and, so, increase the shutter speed, “a wooden frame was erected, about fifty feet long and fifteen high, at a suitable angle, and covered with white cotton sheeting divided by vertical lines into spaces of twenty-one inches, each space being consecutively numbered.”

The lines thus corresponded to the distances between the cameras. At some point, Muybridge decided to mark the track instead; the intervals between the lines/cameras were thus indicated by numbers placed on a baseboard located between the track and the building with the cameras. The outdoor set thus consisted of a foreground, a middle-ground, and a background; the enumerated baseboard, lined track, and planar backdrop, respectively.

The depth of the studio space becomes apparent in a photograph included in the appendix to The Horse in Motion, the publication that came out of the Palo Alto work. View of the Arrangements for Measuring the Strides and Background (fig. 64) pictures the baseboards, track, and backdrop devoid of a subject. It does not appear to have been taken from the building across from the track, where the battery of cameras was located, but from a spot between the building and the track, at a 45-degree angle to it. From this perspective, the tilt of the backdrop is entirely visible, as is the distance between the track and the baseboards upon which the camera spots are enumerated, as well as the landscape in which the racetrack is situated—the worn grassy field where the set was built and the open sky above it. But this sense of space is entirely absent from

166 Stillman, Appendix [about Muybridge’s studio] to The Horse in Motion, p. 124.
167 Stillman, Appendix [about Muybridge’s studio] to The Horse in Motion, p. 125.
the photographs associated with Muybridge’s work—both from Palo Alto and the University of Pennsylvania, where he later expanded both the set and the very purview of his project. The numbers printed on the baseboard look like they are written along the bottom edge of the photograph, the regularly-spaced lines drawn across the width of the track are either washed out or appear to run up towards the base of the backdrop, and the backdrop might read as a wide open space were the stark white cloth not traversed by a thick black horizontal line that highlights its planarity. The three-dimensional space of the studio is thus collapsed into a two-dimensional plane—the surface of the paper on which the photograph itself was printed.

After his most preliminary efforts, Muybridge’s photographs were never shown individually—even Stanford printed them as a series. All twelve (or, in some cases, twenty-four) photographs were reproduced together. In Animal Locomotion, which was produced from the experiments Muybridge conducted at the University of Pennsylvania, the photographs were printed in a row (which meant that up to three rows, one from each battery of cameras, might appear on one plate—one on top of the other). The photographs were thus the same save for the location and position of the subject against the backdrop. In Plate 755 Pigeon flying (fig. 65), for example, the bird moves from the lower right-hand corner of the set up towards the upper left-hand corner; as its wings flap up and down, the pigeon thus progressively transcends the two thick horizontal lines that traverse the background. Comparing or reading the photographs—or,

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168 It was at the University of Pennsylvania that Muybridge produced the 781 plates included in Animal Locomotion, which included a wide range of animal as well as human subjects. The work that went into this project is detailed in several different contemporaneous texts written about it. The sheer breadth of the models that Muybridge photographed was perhaps best summarized by the photographer himself in the Prospectus included with the Catalogue of Plates from which subscribers could select their 100 prints: see Eadweard Muybridge, Animal Locomotion: An Electro-Photographic Investigation of Consecutive Phases of Animal Movements (Philadelphia: Printed by J.B. Lippincott Company under the auspices of the University of Pennsylvania, 1887). In order to picture this variety of models, Muybridge further enhanced his studio and developed his photographic apparatus, as detailed by Dr. William Dennis Marks in his essay, “The Mechanism of Instantaneous Photography,” for the scholarly publication that the University produced from this work: Animal Locomotion: The Muybridge Work at the University of Pennsylvania. The Method and the Result, with essays by Dr. William Dennis Marks, Dr. Harrison Allen, and Dr. Francis X. Dercum (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company for the University, 1888).
more specifically, the birds within them—against one another thus made the fact, direction, and the course of the bird’s movement legible, at least in the lateral photographs. Plate 755 also includes “front foreshortenings” of the pigeon in flight. Here, the bird is photographed in twelve successive positions as it approaches the camera. As it moves away from the gridded, portable backdrop placed at the start of the track, the pigeon nonetheless remains in the center of the composition. Its shape changes, but its location does not. The bird vigorously flaps its wings only to stay in place, with the backdrop fading in and out of view inconsistently depending on technical conditions. Its motions are legible, but its movement is not. Yet, in both series, the planar background establishes a relationship between successive incarnations of the bird, between the forms displayed against its surface, such that they are read against or with one another like the words on a page.

Muybridge exploited the page as a plane upon which forms could be printed and arranged so as to produce meaning. He was attentive to its potential to function as a surface that could be read and constructed his outdoor studio, produced negatives, and printed them in rows so as to mobilize the paper in this way. The photograph was thus an image-based text. In his early still lifes, Harnett depicted things like books and newspapers, as well as letters and money so as to introduce writing into his works and thus enable the paintings to be read. In a manner akin to Muybridge’s photographs, the flat, planar, not to mention vertical, background of the game paintings turned the canvas itself into an acknowledged surface—largely empty if not technically blank—that could be marked and inscribed with symbolic forms; it thus resembled and would function like the various texts that Harnett had previously depicted within his paintings and unlike the landscape and genre paintings in circulation when he was a student. Works like The Tough Story and The Heart of the Andes were of course also marked surfaces, but Mount and
Church did not announce or exploit them as such; they sought to defy both the planarity and the stasis of the canvas. In paintings like *Plucked Clean, For Sunday’s Dinner, Trophy of the Hunt,* and *Merganser Duck,* be it comprised of three planks or two, painted a deep Hunter green or a muddy brown, the wooden support is oriented vertically like a written page and serves as the ground upon which different shapes or forms could be and are arranged. Harnett would deploy a similar background in his later work, but there the wood would be scarred, worn, and otherwise pocked in a manner that exposed the layers of material that constituted it. At this point, in the game paintings, he is interested in the wood as a surface that can exploit the inherent planarity of the canvas so as to render the things laid against it legible and comprehensible. Like Muybridge, Harnett mobilized the pictorial support to establish and reveal the meaning within the physical form of the things laid upon it. In this way, he extended the function of the tabletops in his earlier, horizontal paintings to the entire canvas and, even more pointedly, highlighted the physical surface of the canvas itself.

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Whereas the animals in Muybridge’s studies were very much alive, and his serial photographs dissected their movements into stills, Harnett’s paintings picture game, specifically a duck, rooster, and hare, that has been killed and captured, and exploit their corpses as mere physical things. There is no evidence to suggest where or how the artist may have procured the

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169 In addition to the printed or written page, the verticality of these canvases could also be said to evoke the traditional format of portraiture. Given Harnett’s turn to individual subjects at this time and to organic if not animate subjects in particular, this point is not without note. As he began introducing writing-like compositional strategies into painting, Harnett’s subjects (or objects, as the case may be) were framed as “things,” wherein that term signifies objects invested with a kind of social significance (see Chapter 3 as well). Over the course of his career, Harnett would attempt to extend this relationship between the material and the metaphysical to his paintings in their entirety.
models for these paintings—whether they were based on actual game acquired for this purpose (maybe even his own hunting efforts), reproductions, or another source. But they all hang upside down by a piece of twine tied around one of their feet, which causes their bodies to contort in ways that bring them into dialogue with the decorative flourishes around them. In *Plucked Clean*, the rooster’s left leg, the one that is not tied up, flops down such that it creates a ninety-degree angle with the animal’s right leg—an angle that echoes the shape of the tuft of tail feathers that spring out near them. The legs of the hare in *Trophy of the Hunt* create a similar angle and echo the L-shape of the decorative hinges at the top and bottom of the canvas. (Were the canvas to be rotated ninety degrees and oriented horizontally, the hare would simply look like it was running.) In *Merganser*, the elegant curve of the duck’s body resonates with the delicate loop in the twine attached to its left leg. And, in *For Sunday’s Dinner*, the subtly splayed legs of the rooster—the right tied up by a string, the left free—are repeated in the keyplate pivoting off of the spot that it long adorned and now leaves bare. The hinges and keyplates prompt the animals with which they resonate to read as abstract shapes, too. Despite the departure that these subjects mark from the inanimate objects in which Harnett had been interested to this point, then, he treats the duck, rooster, and hare much like them—that is to say, as material quantities; not only are they dead, but completely defamiliarized (hung upside down and outside of their natural habitats) if not contorted.

To understand what it meant for Harnett to depict these animals as lifeless bodies rather than living, breathing things and, further, what it meant for them, as bodies, to read as abstract shapes, 

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170 In their essays for the *William M. Harnett* catalogue, Elizabeth Jane Connell and Roxana Robinson assert a strong resemblance between the rooster in *Plucked Clean* and *Still Life with Hen* by Nikolaus Gysis, a well-known artist in the orbit of Munich’s Leibl-Kreis, or Leibl Circle. There are also noteworthy similarities between the position assumed by the rabbit in Harnett’s *Trophy of the Hunt* and J.B. Oudry’s *Still Life of a Hare and a Leg of Mutton* (1742). Harnett’s paintings could also be put in conversation with the dining-room pictures popular in the United States at the time. Whether or not he actually looked to Gysis, Oudry, and dining-room pictures, Harnett’s paintings resonate with, and depart from, them in ways that can help explain his interest in animate subject matter, as addressed in this chapter.
it can be helpful to turn to one of the most seminal texts of the nineteenth century, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*. The influence of Charles Darwin’s tract on the perception and depiction of the natural world by landscape painters like Frederic Church has been discussed by authors like Stephen J. Gould, but its significance to American still life remains under-theorized and can be a productive way to think through the depiction of the animals in Harnett’s game paintings. *On the Origin of Species* is concerned with, and outlines, how and why the animal kingdom evolves—what constitutes and accounts for physiological changes, divisions, omissions, and additions within the various groupings that comprise the animal kingdom over broad swathes of geological time. As philosopher of science C. Kenneth Waters points out, *On the Origin of Species* was not the only, nor was it the first, discussion of evolution and natural selection, but it was certainly the most revolutionary, prompting scientists as well as the public to “revise their fundamental assumptions about the place of humans in nature.” Not only did Darwin, as had others, suggest that species mutate and, further, that they do so to increase their chances of survival and procreation, but he posited that different species were descended from common ancestors. The prevailing view held that all species were distinct and immutable. It allowed for great variety within each species, but it classified these species according to their differences from one another. Darwin observed that “we use the element of descent in classing the individuals of both sexes and all ages, although having few characters in

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171 See, for example: Stephen Jay Gould, “Church, Humboldt, and Darwin: The Tension and Harmony of Art and Science.”
172 Scholars like William Gerds and Theodore Stebbins have suggested that Darwin’s ideas, if not his actual treatise, may have influenced still-life painter Martin Johnson Heade to depict hummingbirds within their natural habitat. Yet, it remains to be explored why that is—why Heade may have been interested in things like natural selection, and how it may have aligned with, fed, or otherwise intersected with his pictorial aims and practices. If, as Gould suggests, *On the Origin of Species* was coincident with the decline of Frederic Church’s landscape practice towards the end of the nineteenth-century, it seems pertinent to consider Darwin’s work in relation to the resurgence of still life and portraiture (as well as the coincidence of them) in the same period.
common, under one species; we use descent in classing acknowledged varieties, however
different they may be from their parent; and,” in kind, he suggested, “I believe this element of
descent is the hidden bond of connexion [sic] which naturalists have sought under the term of the
Natural System.” 175 Ostensibly, the Natural System offered a means of classification—like was
grouped with like and separated from unlike—but it provided a tautology rather than an
explanation. Darwin argued that the order within the animal kingdom, which naturalists tended
to attribute to “the plan of the Creator,” 176 was actually (based on comparisons across species)
“founded on descent with modification.” 177 The animal kingdom was an extended and
expansive, diachronic as well as synchronic network that resulted from slow change over
incredibly long amounts of time.

Rather than the differences between species, Darwin focused on their similarities. Other
scientists were interested in “those parts of the structure [of an animal] which determined the
habits of life,” 178 meaning those organs, qualities, and physical characteristics that suited an
animal to its environment—so, for example, gills on a fish. Darwin distinguished between organs
of physiological importance versus those of evolutionary significance, which were more often
much slower to change and seemingly less functional. “We care not how trifling a character may
be—let it be the mere inflection of the angle of the jaw, the manner in which an insect’s wing is
folded, whether the skin be covered by hair or feathers,” writes Darwin, “if it prevail throughout
many and different species, especially those having very different habits of life, it assumes high
value; for we can account for its presence in so many forms with such different habits, only by

175 Darwin, 433.
176 Darwin, 413.
177 Darwin, 420.
178 Darwin, 414.
its inheritance from a common parent.” 179 These “characters” and correspondences were often more visible in the embryonic stage of life, before an animal’s distinct parts emerged and developed through use. The significance of these parts thus lay in their form versus their function—in their shapes and the way that they developed versus how the parts were used or functioned. An animal was not defined by the way that it carried out its bodily functions, but the shape and form that its organism took. Natural selection operated upon these physiological characteristics, which were biologically beneficial, and promulgated them.

This process of mutation plays out through the physical bodies of the species within the animal kingdom, such as those pictured in Harnett’s game paintings; the form that these bodies took in Darwin’s day (as much as the shape that they exhibit within at present) is the result of these evolutionary activities. Like the rings of a tree or a stratigraphic chart, then, the bodies of animals could be said to embody the evolutionary trajectories and histories of their species. Yet, if the sole illustration in On the Origin of Species is any indication, Darwin himself struggled with how evolution could be pictured. As opposed to the plentiful drawings, maps, and other kinds of detailed images in the scientist’s other books, the simple diagram in the On the Origin of Species is a schematic representation of the theory of natural selection that looks more like a mathematical equation than a biological process (fig. 66). Appreciative of Darwin’s plight, literary scholar Jonathan Smith queries in Charles Darwin and Victorian Visual Culture: “how could something that acts at such a leisurely pace and on such tiny variations be captured directly?” 180 Further, Smith suggests that the challenge posed by evolution was how to picture the “unseen,” which he suggests that Darwin did, in this book and others, by recourse to conventions from other scientific disciplines as well as a combination of text and image. Thus,

179 Darwin, 425-6.
he explains that the one diagram in *On the Origin of Species* draws upon pictorial strategies from geology and natural history to offer a “visual corollary” of the Tree of Life that Darwin describes within his abstract. Its stratigraphic lines and the more organically sprawling ones that traverse them picture his theory of natural selection—the way in which different varieties (marked on the diagram by lowercase letters accompanied by exponents) develop, diverge, and become extinct. Darwin relied upon a combination of marks—lines and letters—in order to represent the extended duration as well as breadth of this biological and inherently temporal phenomenon.

The pictorial challenges that Darwin faced in representing evolution thus speak to the phenomenon’s chronological dimension as much as its physiological complexity. Further, they speak to the conjunction of these factors—to the fact that the body changes over time—as well as the increasing pressure on static images to picture dynamic processes at this time (as seen in Muybridge’s work, too). In his game paintings, Harnett treats the corpses of the hare, rooster, and duck as material forms that witness this process in and of themselves. Slung upside down and, in some cases, plucked, they contort into abstract forms and shapes not unlike the decorative keyplates and hinges around them such that they read as morphological types more than unique specimens. As mentioned earlier, historical artists like J.B. Oudry, not to mention Jean-Baptiste-Simeon Chardin and countless others, as well as contemporaries of Harnett like Nikolaus Gysis, also and often depicted dead hares, fowl, and other animals in paint, but, unlike them, Harnett places the corpses of these animals in clear dialogue with ornamental objects (akin to, but different from, the ones to which he would have been exposed in the silver industry). The

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keyplates and hinges underscore the plasticity of the animals’ bodies and, by extension, signal that they, too, are subject to formal manipulation or “design.” Thus, the hare, rooster, and duck in Harnett’s paintings also register as things that have been molded and shaped, albeit by natural versus human forces—comparable to the gravitational pull that causes the legs of the rooster and hare, for example, to flop away from their bodies and assume peculiar positions. Their distorted corpses thus register the animals’ status as evolutionary subjects and, as such, embody as well as exhibit their extended physiological history. Presented against the flat, wooden background that operates like the kind of printed pages seen in Muybridge’s project, these corpses assume the function of letters if not texts. If Muybridge relied upon serial images to render movement visible, Harnett deploys animal corpses to picture the meaning (the history) with which their bodies are inscribed. The game paintings thus give material and thereby legible form to the kind of narrative content—the inherently durational activity—that genre paintings could only illustrate. In them, Harnett attempts to mobilize a subject that will speak for itself.

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There are only five confirmed game paintings by Harnett in public collections today. Given the relatively small number of these works that the artist produced, it seems that the organic subjects that they pictured and the evolutionary narratives that those subjects conveyed were insufficient to his project, which—until that point—had largely been concerned with man-made things. The game paintings helped Harnett turn the canvas into a legible surface, and they helped

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182 It is important to note that if Harnett’s first still lifes looked back to landscape and genre painting, the game paintings actually allude to and draw upon the history of still life. As such, there is room to think about the ways in which they address the history of art as well as history more generally—in addition to the concept of evolutionary history embodied within, and communicated by, the corpses of the animals displayed within them.
him understand his subjects as the source of a painting’s content, but he seemed unsatisfied with
the story, the natural history, which they told. In 1883, just a year after he produced Plucked Clean, his first known game painting, Harnett made the first two of the four works he would call After the Hunt. They both include a dead duck and (what appear to be) two partridges, but these fowl were now accompanied by a shotgun and leather satchel, a knife with an ivory-carved handle, two horns (one brass, another ivory), and a Tyrolean hat decorated with a white feather. The two final versions of the painting, made in 1884 and 1885, retain the rifle, satchel, hat, horns, and knife, but expand to include a spear and antlers and, in the case of the 1885 version, a horseshoe, canteen, and handgun; further, in both the 1884 and 1885 versions, the duck has been swapped out for a hare and, in the 1885 painting, two more birds have been added to the two already present. The After the Hunts thus ‘zoom out’ to include the hunting equipment by which the duck, rooster, and hare in the game paintings would have been located, attracted, killed, and captured.

The European tradition of hunting pictures, which encompassed both still lifes and genre scenes, was well represented at the Aeltern Koeniglichen Pinakothek in Munich during Harnett’s time in that city. The 1881 catalog of the collection notes that works by Philips Wouwerman, Franz Snyders, Willem van Aelst, and no fewer than twelve works by famed Flemish artist of the hunt Jan Weenix were on view. Although these paintings did not constitute the bulk of the still lifes in the Pinakothek’s collection, which were largely of fruit, flowers, and the other kinds of things associated with seventeenth-century Dutch art, they would have reinforced the understanding of Dutch still life that Harnett could have developed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where animal and hunting subjects predominated over inanimate objects in their old

183 Katalog der Aelteren Koeniglichen Pinakothek zu Muenchen (Munich: Friedr. Bruckmann’s Verlag, 1881).
master holdings. Objects like those he pictured in the *After the Hunt* paintings, things like rifles and satchels, not to mention the carcasses of birds and rabbits, were staples of the works on view at the Pinakothek, like the twelve-part decorative wall cycle that Jan Weenix created for Elector Johann Wilhelm’s castle in Bensberg between 1710 and 1714. *Hunting Still Life before a Landscape with Bensberg Castle* (fig. 67), the central panel, pictures the castle, in which the work itself would have hung, atop a hill in the distance; the middleground is filled with a party of hunters on horseback and foot, wielding spears, chasing pigs and surrounded by boisterous dogs. The tools and the fruits of their efforts sit atop the ledge in the foreground: the corpses of small animals cascade out from the stout deer in the center of the composition and intermingle with the accouterments with which this prey would have been caught and killed.

Like *The Heart of the Andes*, then, this single panel presents the entire narrative in which its distinct subjects participated: in this case, the setting, activities, and results of a hunt.

In *The Dutch Gamepiece*, Scott Sullivan suggests that works like Weenix’s cycle and Dutch hunting pictures in general, which became prevalent and popular in the mid-seventeenth-century,

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184 According to the *Catalogue of the Pictures belonging to the Metropolitan Museum of Art* published in the early 1870s, the collection of Dutch and Flemish masters, while largely consisting of paintings of biblical subjects and genre scenes, also included works like *Returning from the Hunt* and *Resting after Hunting* by Jan Jozef Horemans and *Game* by Johannes Fyt and significantly fewer still lifes of flowers, fruit, and inanimate objects. The prevalence of hunting pictures amongst the relatively few Dutch and Flemish still lifes in the collection at the time might account for Harnett’s interest in Germany as a destination for his European studies, where he could have seen much more of this work and, as we know, took it up himself.

185 Although the cycle has not been the subject of a concerted study, the circumstances under which it was made are briefly addressed in the following text: Peter Eikemeier, “Introduction,” *Alte Pinakothek Munich: An Explanatory Guide to the Alte Pinakothek*, eds. Peter Eikemeier, Gisela Goldberg, Ruediger an der Heiden, Konrad Renger, Helge Siebert, Cornelia Syre (Munich: Bruckmann, 1992). For overviews of Dutch hunting pictures in the early modern period, see: Claus Grimm, *Still Life: The Flemish, Dutch, and German Masters* (Stuttgart: Belser Verlag, 1990); Sybille Ebert-Schifferer, *Still Life: A History* (New York: Abrams, 1999); Norbert Schneider, *Still Life and Painting in the Early Modern Period* (Köln: Taschen, 1999). These catalogues tend to align hunting pictures—many of which tend to be much more active, if not outright violent, than those discussed here by Weenix—with still life. Yet, these works do not readily fit into the schema outlined by two of the most insightful texts on seventeenth-century Dutch art, Svetlana Alpers’s *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984) and Alois Riegl’s *The Group Portraiture of Holland* (1902), which characterize seventeenth-century Dutch art by its lack of movement. As such, these hunting pictures might prove a productive foil to the more popular works of this period and the psychological as well as epistemological concerns that they have been understood to exhibit.
did not represent specific hunts. He implies that an actual outing would yield less diverse fruits and entail a more limited set of weaponry. Sullivan thereby concludes that the paintings were mass-produced in response to popular demand. In the Netherlands in the seventeenth-century, hunting was heavily regulated by law and limited to the nobility, who practiced it on their estates, at gaming parks, and preserves. Burghers were banned from the activity, which made hunting and depictions of it the province of the elite. Sullivan thus concludes that burghers purchased gamepieces in order to associate themselves with the exclusive sport. Although his explicit concern is why gamepieces flourished around mid-century, Sullivan also makes an interesting claim about the paintings themselves; they emerge from his argument as “general representations of the sport.” The paintings do not depict specific hunts but the very concept of hunting (as it was practiced on expansive aristocratic estates), which resonates with what we see in Harnett. In the After the Hunt paintings Harnett excises the landscape and activities in which things like a rifle and satchel would be used and a bird and a rabbit would be killed. He isolates these objects, which come to stand for the activities in which they participated, just as the pipes and newspapers in his early work suggested the exchange of ideas that such objects facilitated within the context of mid-century genre paintings. The hunting equipment was the material record and even index of the physical activities in which the men who once wielded it had engaged.

In Harnett’s paintings, the rifle, satchel, and other hunting equipment are not shown on the bodies of hunters, as they are in the middleground of the central panel of Weenix’s cycle, nor are they amassed all haphazardly on a table, as in works by Weenix’s contemporary Willem van Aelst (fig. 68). Rather, the equipment and the birds, and sometimes the rabbit that they helped

187 Sullivan, 40.
capture are all neatly layered on top of one another upon an unseen hook or nail lodged in a wooden door—the hinges and keyplates of which are much more ornate and graphic than the ones seen previously in Harnett’s game paintings. A hunting hat sits towards the top of the composition, a French horn hangs down below it, and a leather satchel with a knife peaking out of it hangs down lower than the horn; the rifle traverses the arrangement, from bottom left to top right; the largest bird hangs the lowest such that its downward pointing beak creating a roughly 60-degree angle with the butt of the gun. Despite the minor variations between the paintings cited earlier, the placement of these objects remains roughly consistent. The most noticeable change from the two earlier instantiations to the later versions is in the density of the composition, which decreases with each successive After the Hunt, as the objects begin to spread out over the hinged door. Harnett’s interest in and familiarity with these objects is not as anachronistic or random as may initially appear. As European-Americans ventured west and northerners traveled south, hunting became a popular recreational activity. Further, instruction manuals like Charles Hallock’s The Sportsman’s Gazetteer and General Guide, William Bruce Leffingwell’s Shooting on Upland, Marsh, and Stream, and Joseph W. Long’s American Wild-Fowl Shooting acquainted would-be practitioners with the ways and means of the sport, while travelogues by such illustrious authors as Theodore Roosevelt, and paintings (as well as popular prints after works) by artists like Charles Deas, William Ranney, and Arthur F. Tait (and, later, at the turn of the century, Frederic Remington) recounted hunting adventures to an eager public.

both at home and abroad. Speaking to the work of Deas, Ranney, and Tait, Elizabeth Johns argues in *American Genre Painting* that:

…many Eastern men constituted Western male types [such as the trapper, the hunter, and mountain man] to function in an open territory in ways they could not openly entertain, and to symbolize the myth they were building about themselves as classless, individualist and powerful.

These figures, Johns contends, were thus to be distinguished from the flatboatmen in works by George Caleb Bingham—who were not at odds with their environment or one another. They were intrepid explorers rather than social creatures. The way in which hunters were portrayed in such paintings as opposed to instructional manuals and memoirs/travelogues can be helpful in understanding Harnett’s shift away from depicting objects associated with explicitly intellectual pursuits, like reading and writing, towards things connected with the incredibly physical activity of hunting.

In American visual culture, hunters were shown both in action and at the ready. In Arthur F. Tait’s *The Pursuit*, 1856 (fig. 69), two white men vigorously pursue a Native American on horseback. The Native American is falling off of his horse yet still looks back at his pursuer, aiming a spear in his direction. Dressed in buckskin, donning a cap, and with a horn and satchel strapped around his chest, the white man grips the reins of his horse, whose head is jolted back, as his companion in the background points a gun at their human prey. In a later and much more sedate image, Theodore Roosevelt would represent himself in the guise of a Western “mountain man.” The frontispiece of *Hunting Trips of a Ranchman: Sketches of Sport on the Northern Plains*:

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190 Johns, 62.
Cattle Plains (fig. 70) the first of three books that Roosevelt published based on the years he spent on a ranch in the Dakota Territory after the death of his pregnant wife and mother on the same day in 1884, shows the would-be president posed not all that differently than he would be almost twenty years later when standing for a portrait by John Singer Sargent (fig. 71). In Sargent’s 1902 painting, Roosevelt stands tall, looking straight at the viewer, with his left hand at his back and his right gripping the bulbous end of a handrail. The frontispiece sees him in a natural setting, still proud, still direct, only there, instead of a three-piece suit, he wears the buckskin clothing that he champions in his text as well as a utility belt with a knife stuck in it and, more so, wields a rifle in both hands. In these pictures, objects like the rifle, satchel, horn, and hat seen in Harnett’s painting serve as mere attributes that identify the white men (over and against the Native American) and Roosevelt as hunters, and the pictures themselves (likely as a consequence of this kind of staging) thus show hunters as a type or social role.

By contrast, instruction manuals and travelogues by practiced hunters describe hunting as a ritualistic, durational, and strategic process or practice. For example, Roosevelt begins “Waterfowl,” the second chapter of Hunting Trips of a Ranchman and the one that focuses on the kind of prey seen in Harnett’s paintings, with this description of a specific hunt:

> …we heard a long way off the ha-ha-honk, ha-honk, of a gang of wild geese; and shortly afterwards they came in sight, in a V-shaped line, flying low and heavily toward the south, along the course of the stream… As the ground was flat and without much cover where they had settled, I took the rifle instead of a shot-gun and hurried after them on foot… At last, peering through a think clump of bulberry bushes I saw them… The only way to get at them was to crawl along the river-bed, which was partly dry, using the patches of rushes and the sand hillocks and drift-wood to shield myself from their view. I fired into the thickest of the bunch, and as the rest flew off, with discordant clamor, ran forward and picked up my victim, a fat young wild goose (or Canada goose), the body badly torn by the bullet. 191

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191 Roosevelt, Hunting Trips of a Ranch Man, 50-51.
Roosevelt hears, watches, pursues, and only then shoots and captures his prey. Like the very goose that he pursues, the reader is not privy to the sight of Roosevelt’s body; rather, throughout this chapter and the book as a whole, which is part sports manual, part natural history, and part memoir, it is the sounds, sights, and environments encountered in the wild that are described. It is written in the first-person such that the reader hears, sees, and moves along with Roosevelt.

Likewise, in Harnett’s paintings, we do not see the hunter. However, each of the objects in the *After the Hunt* paintings hang at the level that they would on his body and precisely where they do in images like *The Pursuit* and the frontispiece to *Hunting Trips of a Ranchman*. The hat sits at the top of the composition, the knife sticks out of the leather satchel that constitutes the bulk of it, and the rifle is strapped across the composition. This motley assortment of objects thus assumes the shape of a hunter in profile, a hunter *after the hunt*—wherein that phrase describes what he is doing rather than *when* the objects in the painting are being shown. They picture a hunter in pursuit of his prey rather than (or as much as) his equipment and bounty following just such an activity. The hat reads as his head, the bag as his body, the horn as his arm, the rifle and down-turned beak of the goose as his legs. Not unlike the figures depicted by Arcimboldo centuries earlier, the hunter is made up of the objects that he used and that characterized him within society.\(^{192}\) In pictures like *The Hunting Trips* frontispiece and *The Pursuit*, these objects served to define the person that they adorned to the viewer; the hunter was thus depicted in the third-person, as he appeared. By making the hunter’s hat his head, a horn his arm, and a rifle his leg, Harnett depicts the hunter as the sum of the actions that he performed, just as Roosevelt did in his text. Roosevelt shielded himself from view, attracted his prey, and chased after it. The *After the Hunt* paintings thus depict hunting in the first-person, as an embodied experience and a

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cluster of operations and actions, as it was described in period texts. This is not to draw a comparison or similarity between the paintings and the kinds of illustrations in this and other books by Roosevelt, but, on the contrary, to suggest that these paintings attempt to perform the operations endemic to the texts themselves. They narrate the very process and practices of the hunt as well as the role of the individual in executing them; yet, at the same time, the objects underscore the activities performed by such a person rather than the identity of the supposed person who might have arranged them. In his early still lifes, Harnett used legible texts to enable the paintings to be read and, thus, the viewer to access the intellectual space to which this activity was a medium. With the After the Hunt paintings, he attempted to cut out the imaginary proxy—the original “reader,” who would have assembled the texts within the canvas—and depict the kinds of activities that might have been described within such texts. The rifle, horns, and other hunting equipment were to represent the actual experience of hunting—rather than the experience of reading about hunting—and, as such, enable the viewer to confront the thoughts, ideas, and sensations generated by the activity itself. The paintings are thus as much verbal as they are visual, in that they operate as surfaces strewn with “characters” that engage the viewer, but also require her or him to stage their meaning.

Although very little is known about Harnett’s life during the four years that he was in Europe, the paintings that he produced there stand as testimony to the images and ideas that interested him. Harnett rotated and solidified the canvas into a vertical plane on which things could be inscribed, composed, and read. These works bear little if any resemblance to the paintings on exhibition in Philadelphia and New York in these years. Rather, they resonate

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193 In the early 1880s, according to the statistical analysis of the exhibitions record at the National Academy of Design in Rave Reviews: American Art and Its Critics, landscape and genre painting continued to dominate the annual exhibitions at that institution. And, in Philadelphia, Thomas Eakins only assumed the directorship of the
with photography, historical art, and written narratives. Whether these media were more popular in Europe or whether Harnett, physically removed from the academic system, was more receptive to them, the strategies on which they depend can help explain the significance of his reorientation of the canvas and of the subjects that he depicted upon it. Recent American painters had tried to transcend the canvas’s physical limitations; William Sydney Mount willfully ignored its flatness and stasis, as Frederic Church tried to defy them. But photographers like Eadweard Muybridge embraced the planarity and fixity of the paper on which their work would be printed; they accepted the picture plane as the foundation of the image. Whether or not the Dutch and Flemish masters, or even Harnett’s German colleagues, inspired him to depict animals and hunting equipment upon that plane, contemporaneous discourses about these subjects reveal the significance of doing so. As writers like Charles Darwin and Theodore Roosevelt demonstrated, the bodies of animals and the process of hunting them provided the kinds of ready narratives absent from (or extraneous to) the pictures championed by the academy. Harnett does not illustrate those narratives in his game paintings and *After the Hunts*; he does not depict the process by which ducks evolved nor what it looks like to hunt. Rather, he presents animal corpses and hunting equipment as emphatically material things that embody these activities—literally, in the case of the game paintings, and figuratively, in the *After the Hunts*. In the these works, the bodies of the animals are contorted and the plentiful objects, impossibly layered upon one hook, so as to convey by way of their physical forms the processes (natural and man-made, respectively) in which they participate. Displayed against a flat, planar background coextensive with the surface of the canvas, the subjects of Harnett’s paintings became language-like characters and, thus, the paintings, legible. The corpses and hunting equipment registered as

Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in 1882. So, for all intents and purposes, the public face of the art world had not changed much since Harnett’s student days.
material quantities upon the physical plane of the canvas and thus signified the meanings inscribed within them by evolution and the hunt. As such, Harnett’s mid-career paintings communicated narratives through—rather than with—the subjects depicted within them. Thereby, he invested the kinds of stories coined by writers like Seba Smith, Louis Noble, and Thomas Winthrop into the very subjects of his work; they did not reside in the literal and figurative space between the objects on the canvas, but within the physical forms taken by the animals and hunting equipment in these paintings. By rendering the surface of the canvas as a wooden wall or door, and depicting inanimate things (organic and not) in ways that communicate their cultural significance, Harnett treated the paintings like the texts only pictured in his early horizontal works and, ironically, by doing so, exploited the potential of the canvas (as a plane) to communicate meaning.

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In the late 1870s, Harnett turned to painting and immediately took up still life, producing pictures of things arranged upon tabletops set in unidentifiable and amorphous spaces. Yet, the very qualities that defined these paintings as still lifes—the inanimate objects that they pictured and the fact that they had been arranged in order to be painted—brought them into dialogue with the genre and landscape paintings that pervaded the art world at this time. The works of artists like William Sydney Mount and George Caton Woodville were littered with the kinds of things that Harnett depicted in his paintings: pipes, mugs, newspapers and the like, while landscape painters like Frederic Church and Jasper Cropsey combined individual sketches and views into unified tableaux, as Harnett would organize the subjects of his paintings. Harnett would have
been acquainted with these artists through the annual exhibitions and single-picture shows in New York and Philadelphia while he was a student in those cities, and their work can help explain the expectations on—or perhaps the imperatives behind—painting in the late-nineteenth century and, so, what it would mean for Harnett to redepot those conventions within the context of still life. Despite their widely divergent (ostensible) subjects—namely, the human experience and the natural world, the paintings of artists like Mount and Church were both distinctly narrative; they sought to depict, one might even say illustrate, events that extended through time and, in Church’s case, space. The iconographic and compositional strategies that they deployed sought to overcome the inherent silence and stasis of the canvas (ironically, those qualities that made painting a pictorial medium) so as to represent the human experience, be it of a conversation or a landscape.

Whether Harnett was motivated by pictorial or conceptual concerns, his paintings would challenge this narrative model. (As a student at the academy, he had come to deploy both the parameters and surface of the paper as an integral aspect of the image and might have been interested to mobilize the canvas in a similar way. Alternatively, his early use of text betrays an interest in the work—both the operations and products—of the mind that would persist, develop, and mature over the course of his career, which may have informed and driven his work.) Either way, he gravitated towards subjects as well as compositional techniques that enabled his paintings to tell as much as visualize versus illustrate a story. In his first paintings, Harnett opted to depict objects—like pipes and texts—associated with the exchange of ideas, and in the two sets of work that proceeded those paintings, he pictured things that spoke to the body—be it that of an animal or a hunter. Yet, in both cases, he approached painting as he had drawing at the outset of his career: as a means to explore how the subjects of his work signified. Harnett
depicted things like the various texts in *Still Life with Letter to Thomas B. Clarke* as planar surfaces marked with forms and, in the process, as well as to the extent imaginable within the pictorial possibilities available to him at the time, extended this mode of communication to his paintings themselves. Like Frederic Church and many of the other most prominent landscape painters in mid-century America, Harnett treated each individual element within the composition as a kind of character and combined them on a planar surface that both established and revealed the conceptual connection between them. But, as those characters were not actually words or views, but objects, and the surface was not a page or a picture plane, but a tabletop, the majority of the canvas remained rather amorphous. The text on the individual objects could be read and, so, aspects of the painting were legible, but the canvas as a whole was not. Rendered as gradated color, the background was emphatically pictorial and, thereby, visualized the psychic space in which the exchange of ideas through text occurs, even if the canvas itself did not and could not yet serve as such a conduit.

Ironically, then, Harnett’s first paintings suggested that objects as well as language-like strategies might offer a way past or beyond illustration—a way to mobilize rather than overcome the canvas, its immobility, and the reliance upon material things that this stasis engenders. But he had yet to locate the kinds of subjects that would enable him to realize these principles through rather than within a painting. That is to say, while his early paintings deployed objects that connote sociability and compositional strategies that evoke it, the works themselves were not yet things able to facilitate communication by way of their material presence or properties, although the direction in which Harnett took his work suggests that was his interest. In Europe, he began to experiment with organic subject matter, namely animals, that were not things over and through which stories were exchanged, but contained one about their own history within the physical
form of their bodies. He also placed these bodies against representations of planks of wood that brought comparable substance to the surface of the canvas as well. Inscribed upon an unequivocal plane marked with decorative ornaments, the corpses of the animals read as shapes that connoted meaning. Yet, it was not until he organized inanimate objects into an anthropomorphic formation in the *After the Hunts* that Harnett found a way for his paintings to convey meaning by way of their composition. Piled onto a nail so as to assume the form of a hunter in the process of using them, the hunting equipment communicated the actions and, so, story of a hunting trip through its placement on the canvas. The narrative was contained within the objects and the paintings versus being alluded to by them and perhaps articulated by a writer, as were the stories illustrated by mid-century landscape and genre paintings. In these works, as in the texts that Harnett had previously pictured, the physical surface of the support and the precise placement of the objects upon it enabled the paintings to tell a story—and, more so, to tell a story in the first-person—rather than to illustrate it from a distance. Harnett exploited the material properties of the canvas and the things that he chose to depict upon it such that his paintings would, like the texts and other objects in his early work, conduct or communicate a narrative. This is not to say that works like the landscapes and genre scenes that served as Harnett’s models of what a painting was did not transmit and spark ideas, stories, and information—they most certainly did—but to assert that those paintings were either informed by literary sources and/or required supplementary texts in order to make their narratives comprehensible (think, for example, of the influence of Alexander von Humboldt’s *Cosmos* on Frederic Church or the story that Seba Smith wrote to accompany *The Tough Story*). By contrast, Harnett’s paintings represented activities evoked by the juxtaposition of the types of objects that he selected and the way they were presented on the canvas. He depicted objects associated with language and
composed them in a text-like manner and, thereby, was able to generate meaning through the physical painting and the subjects depicted upon it. It did not exist in the space between the things that he portrayed, as in the genre paintings and landscapes to which Harnett would have looked and from which he would have gleaned an understanding of images as opposed to texts, but inhere in the very objects that he rendered—the ones that he pictured upon the canvas as well as the canvas itself.
Coda

On November 28, 1886, Detective Drummond of the Secret Service Division of the United States Treasury Department walked into Theodore Stewart’s Saloon at 8 Warren Street in New York and seized a copy of a ten-cent note. Drummond’s attention had been drawn to the saloon by two men he had recently investigated and, in his words, “suppressed.” 194 M.W. Dowd and J.F. Sullivan had been accused, respectively, of making “flash notes” (counterfeit money) and “flash note plates.” 195 In his daily log that day, Drummond wrote that, “both called at [his] office and complained that Theodore Stewart a saloon keeper at No. 8 Warren St. had an exact copy of a ten dollar note painted and framed and asked why can he have this exact copy when [they] are forbidden to make a poor imitation?” 196 When Drummond and his colleagues saw the copy, they declared “it to be the closest thing to a note we ever saw.” 197 The copy in question was one of Harnett’s early paintings, possibly Still Life—Ten-Cent Bill (fig. 72). The 5 ½ x 7 ½ inch painting depicts the note above an illegible newspaper clipping against a black ground. The note is worn and faded as though it had been in circulation for many years before being displayed there. Stewart refused to hand over or destroy the painting and, instead, offered another work by Harnett of a $5 treasury note, perhaps Still Life—Five-Dollar Bill, from his saloon on John Street. Drummond promptly and “properly boxed and shipped it” 198 to Daniel Manning, Secretary of the Treasury, in Washington, D.C.

194 Harnett mentions the investigation of him and Theodore Stewart in the News interview re-printed in Alfred Frankenstein’s After the Hunt (56). The material in this coda follows up on his account and is drawn from: Detective Drummond, Secret Service Division, United States Treasury Department, T915A/87/Rolls 97 and 98 [Vols. 34-36 (Oct. 1, 1885-Oct. 31, 1886) and Vols. 37-38 (Nov. 1, 1886-Aug. 31, 1887)] Daily Reports of the U.S. Secret Service Agents, 1875-1936, National Archives at College Park, Maryland.
196 Ibid.
197 Ibid.
198 Detective Drummond, November 28, 1886, p. 4, Daily Reports of the U.S. Secret Service Agents, 1875-1936.
Harnett was then called into Drummond’s office, where he explained that he had painted four such works in total (two for Stewart, one for a detective in Philadelphia, and another for an attorney there). As Drummond reports, the artist then claimed that “he could engrave a better note than he painted as his trade was an engraver.” In other words, if he wanted to make an exact replica of the ten-cent bill, Harnett would not have used paint on canvas, but the technique by which such notes were actually produced. His painting of a $5 treasury note was returned to Theodore Stewart’s saloon on Dec. 1st 1886. A week later, Detective Drummond received a letter from Secretary Manning that declared that “the painting comes within the spirit of section 5430 of the R.S. [Revised Statutes] of the United States but does not advise prosecution in this particular case as evidently no fraud was intended but suggests that neither these people or others engaged in such practices again.” Section 5430 stipulated that any person who possesses, sells, or buys plates that can be used to print currency, participates in this process, or allows it to occur is subject to up to a $5000 fine, imprisonment with hard labor for up to fifteen years, or both. Although Drummond’s log does not specify the potential charges against Stewart, presumably the bar owner constituted a person:

…who has in his possession or custody, except under authority from the Secretary of the Treasury or other proper officer, any obligation or other security, engraved and printed after the similitude of any obligation or other security issued under the authority of the United States, with intent to sell or otherwise use the same…

Harnett was absolved of any guilt early in the case, which strictly focused on Stewart. The authorities did not consider the ten-cent or five-dollar bills counterfeits, but feared that the display of these paintings might prompt others to produce false currency. Stewart was ordered to

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199 Detective Drummond, November 28, 1886, p. 5, *Daily Reports of the U.S. Secret Service Agents, 1875-1936*.
202 Ibid.
remove the ten-cent bill to his private quarters, and Harnett was reprimanded and told not to produce any more such works.\textsuperscript{203} For all intents and purposes, then, the paintings were legally declared works of art, not acts of deception. Ultimately, Drummond and Manning decided that the paintings were not counterfeit currency not because they did not look like a ten-cent or five-dollar bill, which both men adamantly agreed that the paintings did, but because Harnett, by his own admission, had not intended for them to deceive anyone. If he had, the artist declares, he would have engraved them by a process akin to the one by which money was actually made. This claim and Drummond and Manning’s willingness to accept it betray a radically different conception of painting than the one manifest in the landscapes and genre paintings of mid-century America. Paintings by artists like Frederic Edwin Church and William Sydney Mount were works of art because they reproduced traditional pictorial subjects like the natural world and human society. By the 1880s, though, paintings like \textit{Still Life—Ten-Cent Bill} and \textit{Still Life—Five-Dollar Bill} could re-present printed material and be works of art because of the materials used to produce them. As paint on canvas, these works were understood to do more than simply reproduce what these bills looked like, and to do so for more esoteric reasons than imitation and possible even deception. Rather, the material means used to produce them carried meaning for (and between) the artist as well as the viewer. As such, the paintings themselves, like the bills pictured within them, became a tangible medium by which ephemeral values were exchanged.

\textsuperscript{203} Detective Drummond, November 28, 1886, p.5 and December 7, 1886, p.3, \textit{Daily Reports of the U.S. Secret Service Agents, 1875-1936}.  

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In 1890, *The Faithful Colt* (fig. 73) was displayed in the showrooms of the Black, Starr, and Frost jewelry firm in New York. The firm, which by 1912 was able to boast that it was the oldest jewelry house in the country, was then located in its fifth site, on Fifth Avenue and Twenty-Eighth Street, in the very epicenter of New York society. Black, Starr, and Frost catered to the elite clientele that lived in the lavish mansions along that thoroughfare and supplied them with everything from precious gems and small leather goods to stationery, watches, clocks, silverware, and elaborate tea services. These objects filled the clawfoot display cases that populated their sumptuous showrooms. There, customers would see not only the luxury goods that they had come to buy, but also the paintings displayed around the perimeter of the room. An illustration of one showroom in the brief history published by the company upon its sixth move (fig. 74), which was also the third up Fifth Avenue, shows at least four paintings hanging in a tightly packed row down the length of the wall and interspersed with several ornate mirrors. The precise subjects of the paintings are indecipherable; the works just read as dark squares surrounded by white mats and, as such, simply embellish the wall and decorate the room, as would the objects for sale in the display cases below them.

If still lifes, these paintings would likely be the fruit or flower arrangements so popular at the time. In his genealogy of American still-life painting, William Gerdts notes that after the absence of the genre from gallery walls in the 1830s and 1840s, it reappeared around 1860 in the work of artists like Severin Roesen, John F. Francis, George Hall (who was arguably its most popular and successful practitioner at the time, though largely forgotten today), George Cochran Lambdin,

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204 Frank Listow White, “Art Notes,” *Epoch*, December 12, 1890, 300.
and John LaFarge. Roesen, whose paintings often appear beside those of William Harnett in museums today, was engaged in an entirely different mode of still life. His paintings, like *Still Life with Fruit*, 1860 (fig. 75) feature a cacophony of flowers and organic subjects ornately arranged in gem-like containers wherein each element is rendered as delicate and as luminous as glass. Likewise, paintings by John Francis depict fruit opulently arrayed on a tabletop in a domestic or natural setting painted with crude, albeit precise brushwork. The work of George Cochran Lambdin, while more spare than that of Roesen, also reveled in elegant flowers, often roses, displayed in a large vase or in situ, still in the artist’s garden, as they appear in *Roses*, 1878 (fig. 76). Unlike those works, although contemporaneous with them, John LaFarge’s floral studies were informed by what Gerdts called a “poetic spirit,” which contrasted with the highly detailed “scientific” images of hummingbirds and flowers produced by artists like Martin Johnson Heade at this time. Yet, nonetheless, as Gerdts notes, “as the nineteenth century progressed, more and more artists became involved in flower painting, so that by the end of the century it was the most popular subject among still lifes.”

*The Faithful Colt* marked quite a departure from this work. The painting does not depict flowers or fruit or even the containers in which such things might be found (and examples of which might be on sale at Black, Starr, and Frost) but a functional tool: namely, a worn and used revolver. This is the last of the five (known) works by Harnett that features a sole man-made object; the others were painted in 1886—*Colossal Luck* and *The Golden Horseshoe* (fig. 77) depict the equine accessory penetrated by two nails, and the other two paintings feature a rustic meerschaum pipe (figs. 78-79). These are not the texts—the tattered books, printed newspapers, by William H. Gerdts, *Painters of the Humble Truth: Masterpieces of American Still Life, 1801-1837* (Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press; Tulsa, OK: Philbrook Art Center, 1981).


207 Gerdts, 146.

208 Gerdts, 130.
and handwritten letters—that dominated the artist’s early tabletop still lifes, but three-dimensional devices, albeit ones that have been rendered defunct or otherwise obsolete. They have been suspended from a nail in the center of the canvas, which has been painted to look like the wooden ground in the game paintings that preceded them, but aged and decrepit. And unlike the rooster, hare, and duck in those earlier paintings, the revolver, horseshoe, and pipe in these works are accompanied by an illegible newspaper clipping. Like a text panel in a museum, the clipping sits beside and below the object, which has been taken out of commission. The Faithful Colt and its corollaries, then, were patently pictures of man-made objects and, further, they unequivocally depicted those man-made objects as on display.

Scholars have detailed the iconography of these paintings and suggested why such subjects may have appealed to contemporary viewers, but the question remains: why would Harnett make them the subject of his work? How were objects like those depicted in his paintings understood at the time? What was an “object,” or how would they have read to Harnett and his viewers? Further, why would he put them on display in his paintings? What did it mean to put an object on display in late-nineteenth-century America, particularly in a painting that was itself meant to be exhibited (be it in a home, a gallery, or a jewelry store, as the case may be)? In order to answer these questions, this chapter will reconstruct the culture of objects in late-nineteenth-century America. The word “object,” here, will be seen to refer to a particular conception of man-made things that was in circulation at the time (a definition in which contemporary discussions of objecthood by thinkers such as Bill Brown are explicitly steeped). As industrial

209 Here, I primarily refer to several of the essays in the William M. Harnett catalogue, such as “Literary References in Harnett’s Still-Life Paintings” and “Harnett and Music: Many a Touching Melody,” which provide detailed accounts of the books and scores, for example, that the artist frequently pictured. Michael Leja and David Lubin interpret the reception of Harnett’s paintings in their studies of the artist, which will be addressed later in this chapter.

modes of production took hold, discourses within political economy, anthropology, and the decorative arts developed to negotiate and, in some cases, even impede or counteract these changes. In the process, a distinct vocabulary emerged to talk about objects—what they were and why that mattered. Harnett began to concertedly focus his work on three-dimensional objects in the midst of these discussions. This is not to say that he was inspired by them, but, rather, to suggest that the terms that thinkers like Karl Marx, Franz Boas and Otis T. Mason, as well as Walter Crane began to use to describe similar things can help explain the function of objects in Harnett’s work and the function of his work as an object.

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The revolver depicted in *The Old-Fashioned Colt* does not look like a particularly prized possession. The base of its ivory handle is littered with cracks, its edges have turned a putrid yellow, and the once-silver body and barrel of the gun are now mottled with rust. It hangs on a shiny silver nail that only underscores the age and deterioration of the gun’s chrome body. The gun—pictured in 1890—is a .44 caliber Model 1860 Army Revolver. It was designed and produced by Colt’s Patent Fire Arms Manufacturing Company to be distributed to Union soldiers on the eve of the Civil War. 211 Like most of the objects portrayed in Harnett’s paintings, this one came from his personal and extensive collection of models. The catalogue published upon Harnett’s estate sale in 1893, after his death the previous year, provides an overview of its contents. 212 Published by Thomas Birch’s Sons in Philadelphia, the catalogue lists twenty-six drawings, twelve paintings (*The Faithful Colt* and *Colossal Luck* amongst them), as well as

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literary scholar Bill Brown calls for a more nuanced understanding of the ways that objects are invested with and impact the subjects, or individuals, engaged with them. He thus designates them “things” so as to allow for the complexity, ambiguity, and mutability of the object-subject relationship. *A Sense of Things* tracks this phenomenon to the late-nineteenth century, which was the specific moment in which Harnett worked.


seventeen pieces of armor (such as pistols, hunting horns, and knives, among other objects),
thirteen musical instruments (from tambourines to violins to cornets), and hundreds of
“miscellaneous articles,” including everything from lamps, pitchers, vases, tankards, and
candlestick holders to a crucifix and rosary, pipes and other smoking paraphernalia, numerous
rugs and books as well as the artist’s own easel, palette, maul-stick, painting coat and cap,
prepared canvases and brushes.

For the catalogue, the objects were identified, categorized, numbered, and often described.
For example, lot 144, a meerschaum pipe, was described as a present given “to Mr. Harnett by
Raucher’s Verein Club, of Munich, of which he was a member, and used by him as a model.”

The catalogue tells us that the large tambourine at lot 59 was “painted in the Old Cupboard
Door, owned by William B. Bement, of Philadelphia.” And the sterling silver tankard with
cover at lot 80 was described as an “antique, of the fifteenth century; a magnificent piece of early
French repoussé work, representing Bacchanalian figures; with coat of arms on the front; bought
in Paris at a great expense and used as a model in painting.”
The contents of Harnett’s collection, then, were auctioned off as souvenirs of the artist, his work, and/or the historical
context in which they were made, bought, and used. The catalogue thus suggests (and even
imparts) an acquired social and cultural currency to the objects apart from, and in addition to, the
original function that they were made to serve—be it to smoke tobacco, make music, or store
wine.

This was how Karl Marx had recently described and theorized the commodity. It was an
object that had accrued “metaphysical” significance. The commodity and commodity desire

213 The Wm. Michael Harnett Collection, 16.
214 The Wm. Michael Harnett Collection, 10.
215 The Wm. Michael Harnett Collection, 12.
have long been used as a lens to explain the subjects of Harnett’s paintings as well as the paintings themselves. For example, art historian Michael Leja interprets the objects as commodities that fulfilled their promise. He writes, “as an index of sustained tactile contact—touching, holding, using—wear implies a residual human presence, which Harnett’s paintings maximize and highlight… The objects become metonymic signs for the beings with whom they have been in intimate and extended contact.” The aged and dilapidated objects were substitutes for the people who once handled them and the physical contact that they experienced. Further, the highly realistic paintings stimulated a desire to touch those objects, open the doors against which they hung, and connect with the individual who was presumably responsible for them; yet, as mere representations, they could not fulfill that potential: “to the extent that Harnett’s paintings produced in viewers a collection of desires—for tactile gratification, entry into illusion, material fullness, human contact through objects, and so on—they fostered the relationship with material things that came to dominate in commodity culture.” Leja thus argues that the paintings, like the commodities pervading American society, seduced the viewer with the hope of human relations; they solicited his gaze and, more so, his touch with used and worn objects as well as thick impasto passages. They evoked or suggested people that were absent, times that were past, or spaces that could only be imagined in order to spark and dubiously assuage the viewer’s desire for some kind of connection.

Likewise, in his discussion of Harnett, art historian David Lubin also reads the artist’s subjects and, by extension, his paintings against the commodity. He suggests that the objects spoke to traditionally male professions and social pursuits; further, their aged and worn surfaces distinguished them from commodities, which were marketed towards women. Yet, the highly

218 Leja, 151.
realistic or “mechanical,” as Lubin describes it, style in which these objects were rendered gave men purchase on modernity as well as the opportunity to prove and flatter their visual and mental acuity. 219 He nears conclusion;

Thus trompe l’oel painting constructed masculine subjectivity in seemingly opposite or contrary ways vis-à-vis the commodity. At the level of iconography it eschewed the impersonal commodity and the feminized commodity realm for what appeared to be a world of objects that were personal and manly. At the level of form, however, these paintings mimicked aspects of the mechanically produced and reproduced look of commodities, thus optically providing the viewer with the sense of worldly sophistication and manly ownership that so many of these commodities made it their business to offer. 220

Lubin thus argues that both the subjects and the style of the paintings spoke to, and helped assert, the white middle-class male’s sense of masculinity, which was being threatened by economic and social conditions that catered to women.

For Leja and Lubin, then, the commodity serves as a foil to discuss both the subjects of Harnett’s paintings as well as the paintings themselves. It is the basis of their arguments. Yet, they define the commodity in distinctly vernacular and even contemporary terms. Leja relies upon its seductive qualities—its ability, as an object, to hold the promise of human connection, but to ultimately leave this desire unfilled. Lubin supposes the commodity to be a highly finished and, thus, attractive product. These working definitions highlight a critical aspect of the commodity—namely, that it appealed to the consumer. Indeed, Marx describes how the desires stimulated by mass-produced commodities came to supplant actual social relations; they stirred emotions and impulses even as they fulfilled practical needs. This characteristic enables Leja and Lubin to explain what they see as the illusionistic quality of Harnett’s work. His meticulously wrought canvases were meant to appeal to viewers as commodities did to consumers; in fact, the

220 Lubin, 295.
viewers were the consumers. Thus, the paintings initiated their audience into, and acculturated them to, the visual, economic, and social realities of modernity. For Leja and Lubin, then, the commodity helped them understand how and why Harnett made recourse to trompe l’oeil in late-nineteenth-century America. They understand his paintings as illusions and use the commodity to explain both how and why they “work” upon their viewers.

These discussions also imply that trompe l’oeil was a style, which Harnett applied to his work, as though his paintings could have appeared, albeit less realistically, without it. They distinguish between the worn, aged, and dilapidated subjects within the paintings and the polished veneer laid upon them. But Marx, himself, suggests that style, or the form that an object takes, is directly related to how and why it is made. The commodity is not simply a social agent, but a manufactured product, and capitalism is not just a social ill, but a mode of production. These basic tenets form the foundation of Capital: A Critique of Political Economy. In it, Marx details the economic principles and social dynamics behind capitalist modes of production in order to expose the foundations of contemporary class struggle. Under capitalism, goods were no longer produced strictly to meet the needs of a community, but to be submitted to a market economy. This impacted both the labor that was invested within them, as well as the value that they were ascribed. Marx highlights and explores the distinctions between how things were made and valued in communal societies versus how they were treated in capitalist systems in the first part of his tract. He defines a commodity as follows:

A commodity is, in the first place, an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another. The nature of such wants, whether, for instance, they spring from the stomach or from fancy, makes no difference. Neither are we here concerned to know how the object satisfies

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221 Karl Marx, Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, vol. 1, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (London: Swan Sonnenschein, Lowrey & Co., 1887). The first English translation of Capital was based on the third German edition, which had been published in 1867. Its reception by American audiences might provide additional insight into the ways in which objects were understood by the culture in which Harnett lived and worked.
these wants, whether directly as means of subsistence, or indirectly as means of production.  

A commodity, then, is a resource; it is something within the world (rather than within the self) on which one can draw in order to fulfill a physical or psychological need. It is some raw material that sustains or facilitates human life.

However, that material must be molded and shaped in some way (minimal as it may be) in order to meet those needs. Marx refers to the thought, energy, and action required to transform a natural resource into a practical object as “useful labor.”  

It involves “a special productive activity, exercised with a definite aim, an activity that appropriates particular nature-given materials to particular human wants.”  

Useful labor, then, is guided by the purpose to which the resource is to be put and, so, shapes the resource to fulfill that function. The form of the object that results thus reflects the needs and desires that stimulated it. Marx defines this object as a “use-value.”  

This term refers to the material quality of the commodity—that aspect, which enables it to serve its practical purpose. “The use-values, coat, linen, &c.,” he writes, “i.e., the bodies of commodities, are combinations of two elements—matter and labour.”  

They are, in other words, obdurately physical things—raw material that has been shaped by man to suit his needs.

For Marx, then, the commodity was first and foremost a physical object: “commodities come into the world in the shape of use-values, articles, or goods, such as iron, linen, corn, &c. This is their plain, homely, bodily form. They are, however, commodities, only because they are
something two fold, both objects of utility, and, at the same time, depositories of value.” An object was not necessarily a commodity; it only became one when value was imposed upon it, when its worth did not derive from its material properties or the ends to which they were put. However, a commodity is always an object; it is brute material molded and shaped to meet a need—be that need steeped in practical circumstance or personal desire. Herein lay its “illusionism”: its monetary value and social promise are in fact extrinsic to its status as a functional object. Leja and Lubin respond to this aspect of the commodity, to its role as an “exchange-value.” But while Marx’s tract does assert the cultural significance of the commodity, in the process and in order to do so, it primarily defines it as a man-made object—specifically, matter shaped by labor.

So, while Harnett’s estate sale catalogue describes the revolver at lot 43 as a memento of the artist’s work, “made famous by Mr. Harnett’s realistic painting of the same,” it was also, and foremost, an object manufactured by Colt from ivory and steel. The same gun appears in a commemorative print issued by the Colt Company in the early 1870s (fig. 80). Its sleek and sturdy form dominates the left portion of the diagonally bifurcated composition and appears again in situ in the episode sketched into the lower right-hand corner. There, a battalion, complete with an American flag, implements the order to fire; with their long-necked rifles and muskets, the crouched combatants assemble into two crowded and chaotic rows. But with a Colt .44 gripped in his right hand, the foremost soldier in the back row distinguishes himself from the pack. The revolver grants him the courage and the freedom to charge ahead. These ideals (not to mention the strength of the entire battalion) are embodied in the model that slices across the

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227 Tucker, ed., 312.
228 The Wm. Michael Harnett Collection, 9.
print; poised at a stark horizontal, it only requires a pull of the trigger to unleash its strength. The print thus pictures the revolver as a commodity in the manner that commodities are colloquially understood—as objects for sale, but also as things that embody the promise of ideals well beyond the practical purposes that they were designed to serve. In Harnett’s painting, though, the revolver is decidedly out of service. It has been unceremoniously slung up on a nail by its trigger guard, whose intended defendant has been lost or removed. Defunct, its impotent barrel now rotates down towards the bottom of the canvas. The cracks in its handle and rust stains on its barrel do not inspire or promise confidence or bravery, but witness the material effects of past struggles on its body. These blights and scars—suffered during the Civil War or the time that elapsed since it—expose and underscore the raw materials out of which the revolver was constructed. The rust and cracks demonstrate that the Colt .44 was made from raw materials (namely, ivory and steel), which were smelted, carved, and otherwise manipulated into their current form. The revolver may have been a product purchased for any number of reasons, but it was also (and Harnett pictures it as) a man-made object constituted by both matter and labor. Harnett was less interested in how the gun was procured or used than in how it was made. He uses painting, as he had drawing at the outset of his career, to investigate and reconstruct the physical structure of his subject—in this case, a Colt .44 revolver—such that *The Faithful Colt* has less in common with the kinds of advertisements in which this object was originally pictured than with the gun itself, as something that was designed and then made.

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The Colt .44 revolver is not the only substantive object depicted in *The Faithful Colt*. A small newspaper clipping is affixed directly to the wooden planks several inches below the gun’s cylinder. Its proximity to the gun and the two objects’ circumscription within this painting brings them into dialogue and establishes a relationship between them that they might not otherwise have. As a small text panel, the newspaper clipping assumes the force of an explanatory label, the revolver serves as its focal point, and the painting thus reads as a display of some sort. Those who have written most probingly on Harnett have all invoked store window displays as an admittedly imperfect parallel to his paintings. For example, Cécile Whiting writes;

Without belaboring their obvious differences, the logic of window display and trompe l’oeil painting, it should be clear, shared the production of an illusion, a subsequent moment of disillusioning recognition, a loss of full presence of the thing shown, followed by a certain pleasure to be derived from the exercise of the skill that recognizes that fact.\(^{230}\)

Whiting argues that store windows and Harnett’s “trompe l’oeil” paintings operated according to the same strategy: they staged elaborate ruses that deceived the viewer only to enable him to assert and admire his own wit—a claim echoed by David Lubin in his account of the artist. For Whiting, this impulse was informed by historical, commercial, and ultimately democratic imperatives, whereas for Lubin, it bolstered the modern man’s sense of purpose and self. Similarly, Michael Leja claims that these windows, as well as Harnett, attempted to attract the attention of passers-by and stimulate their desire to touch and possess the objects within them; like commercial advertisements, the windows and paintings fetishized their subjects, which came to represent entities and ideals well beyond themselves.\(^{231}\) Whiting and Leja, then, understand store window displays as a way to attract and appeal to (if not trick) the eye. And they suggest


\(^{231}\) Leja, 146-150.
that Harnett’s paintings, which are equally object-based and also characterized by a polished veneer, operate according to the same visual logic.

Yet, both the subjects as well as the composition of the paintings differ from these retail displays. As David Lubin notes, the casual and spare arrangement of objects in Harnett’s paintings differed markedly from the abundant and highly methodical displays in stores such as Wanamaker’s in Philadelphia;

Inside the emporia, counters are piled high with products stacked in pyramids and towers, the fastidious symmetry indicating the management’s laudable attention to organization and detail. The windows are packed with goods from top to bottom and side to side as if empty space might connote to shoppers an ill-stocked establishment. 232

The windows and interiors of department stores were meticulously arranged and abundantly stocked to entice and reassure the consumer. Lubin saw Harnett’s work, by contrast, as “casual, and even careless,” 233 but nonetheless also “calculated to please or entice.” 234 This kind of seduction was also the imperative behind the displays described in the hallmark of late-nineteenth-century window design, L. Frank Baum’s *The Art of Decorating Dry Goods Windows and Interiors*, 235 mentioned by all of the above authors. In his manual, Baum offers step-by-step instructions to the would-be window designer/retailer in everything from how to prepare a window for display, drape it with fabric, and label it with stencils. But the majority of the book is dedicated to increasingly intricate spectacles that one might use to advertise his merchandise; examples include The Vanishing Lady as well as mechanical displays that enact the eruption of Mount Vesuvius or a canal scene in Venice (fig. 81). 236 A discussion of arches and columns is

232 Lubin, 315-316.
233 Lubin, 316.
234 Lubin, 315.
236 These displays are discussed on pages 83-84, 97-100, and 105-108, respectively.
followed by a brief description of a window, or “picture,” in which the Brooklyn Bridge was constructed out of 1,225 spools of thread that were later sold off at a cost of seven for $0.25. These windows were meant to be “attractions” that “[induced] the pedestrian to stop and look, or,” as Baum admonished his readers, “your window is a flat failure.” They were a means to draw in customers; the retailer was to do this “by placing [products] before the public in such a manner that the observer has a desire for them, and enters the store to make a purchase.” That manner was enigmatic, mobile, or otherwise spectacular displays that arrested the pedestrian and caught his/her eye.

But objects (and more specifically aged objects) were also prominently on display in the ethnographic exhibits and museums that had recently been established in major cities along the East Coast. These displays regularly paired tools and implements, not unlike those seen in Harnett’s paintings, with detailed object labels. In December 1888, George Brown Goode, who was then the Assistant Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, which had opened the United States National Museum not long before with a significant ethnological component, addressed the American Historical Association. He was asked to provide some thoughts on museums and how they might be used to advance the discipline of history. Goode took the opportunity to provide a brief history of the museum as an institution and explain its purpose in the modern world. He stated that “the museum must, in order to perform its proper function, contribute to the advancement of learning through the increase as well as through the diffusion of knowledge.”

It was to be both a research institution and an exhibition hall, a place where ideas were both

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237 Baum, 238-240.
238 Baum, 147.
239 Baum, 146.
241 Kohlstedt, ed., 309.
generated and presented. To that end, objects were to be collected and displayed in a manner suited to the two audiences who would use them: investigators or scientists and the public. As opposed to cabinets of curiosities, museums were to adopt a systematic approach to acquisitions, research, and installations. This meant laboratories, libraries, and storage facilities where scientists could study and classify the objects under their supervision as well as organized display cases and systematic exhibitions in which to translate their conclusions to the general public. Goode thus claimed that:

The people’s museum should be much more than a house full of specimens in glass cases. It should be a house full of ideas, arranged with the strictest attention to system. I once tried to express this thought by saying: ‘An efficient educational museum may be described as a collection of instructive labels, each illustrated by a well-selected specimen.’

Museum displays, as opposed to store displays, then, used objects as well as labels to express—even visualize—ideas.

Goode believed that the proper display of objects could help convey the conclusions that scientists had drawn from them. He began his speech to the Brooklyn Institute in 1889, just a couple of months after his engagement at the American Historical Association, with multiple idiomatic expressions that testified to the cognitive powers of sight: “the distance between the ear and eye is small, but the difference between hearing and seeing very great,” as well as “to see is to know.” For Goode, to see an object in the appropriate context was more expedient, dependable, and accessible than reading a scientific treatise or tract. After all, as he proclaimed,

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242 Kohlstedt, 306. Franz Boas expressed a similar philosophy in a letter to Prof. F.W. Putnam, the director of the American Museum of Natural History, which he sent in anticipation of that institution’s installation of its ethnographic collections. Boas believed that an exhibit should be edited down such that every object was “instructive either through its characteristics or through its associations.” To that end, he asserted that each specimen should be displayed with a label or, in the case of the most important objects, as part of a life group—an idea on which I will expand below. (Boas to Putnam, November 7, 1896. Division of Anthropology; American Museum of Natural History Archive.)


244 Kohlstedt, ed., 321.
“the museum of the future in this democratic land should be adapted to the needs of the mechanic, the factory operator, the day laborer, the salesman, and the clerk, as much as to those of the professional man and the man of leisure.”

It must be intelligible to all. For this reason and others, the museum trumped the library as an educational institution. In a museum, many people of varied training could all peruse the materials at once, at a glance, without having to remove them from their places within the system. The installation itself was instructive; it lent meaning to the objects displayed within it. As the visitor went through the exhibit, he would deduce the principle behind its installation. Thus, Goode claimed that “the museum cultivates the powers of observation, and the casual visitor even makes discoveries for himself, and, under the guidance of the labels, forms his own impressions.”

As opposed to the library, which only dispensed knowledge, the museum provided an engaged intellectual experience. Its displays did not simply reproduce ideas, but generate them—both through the way that the objects were juxtaposed and the manner in which the visitor interpreted those juxtapositions.

In 1884, George Brown Goode hired Otis T. Mason as the first curator of ethnography at the recently opened United States National Museum (now the Smithsonian Institution) and thereby initiated a debate about exhibit design that would usher in the discipline of cultural anthropology. Mason was responsible for approximately 500,000 artifacts, which—as historian Curtis Hinsley notes—encompassed those objects that could not readily be classified into either the departments of Arts and Industries, which handled Western technology, or archaeology, which addressed so-called “primitive” objects.

Per Goode’s museum philosophy, Mason was to analyze these artifacts as well as convey his conclusions to the public through a permanent exhibition. Mason

245 Kohlstedt, ed., 328.
246 Kohlstedt, ed., 331.
chose to organize the displays by object, or “technology.” When the exhibit opened in 1887, Franz Boas, who was then the Assistant Editor of geography at Science, published a brief, but pointed critique in the pages of that journal. Over the course of several issues, he and Mason drew on their divergent disciplinary backgrounds to debate the basic purpose and fundamental principles of ethnography as well as the exhibitions best suited to it. Despite—or, in fact, because of—the stark differences in how Mason and Boas defined both art and science, their debate reveals what it meant for Harnett to compose The Faithful Colt as the display of a defunct object.

Mason trained informally under the famed Smithsonian ornithologist Spencer F. Baird for years before Goode appointed him Curator of Ethnography at the Museum. Baird taught Mason the scientific methods used in the study of birds: namely, classification. Mason then applied and adapted this technique to the inanimate objects in his care. He studied their physical characteristics and the circumstances in which they were made and categorized the objects according to accepted “classific concepts”: namely, “material, race, geographical areas, social organizations, environment, structure and function, and evolution or elaboration” as well as other secondary factors. Mason borrowed these categories from such predecessors as Gustav Klemm, who curated the Museum of Ethnology in Leipzig. Yet, he personally was most interested in the “structure and function” of these objects, as well as their “evolution or elaboration”—meaning, how they worked and developed. Mason understood anything created by

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250 Hinsley, Jr., 86.
251 Mason, Science, 226.
252 Hinsley, Jr., 87-88.
man—be it a physical object, a language, an industry, or a philosophy—as an “invention.” As such, it was the result of at least three factors: “...the mental acts of inventing, of thinking out how; the things invented, usually called inventions; and the rewards bestowed on the inventor, nowadays called patents, but granted in some form during all ages.” “Invention,” then, not only referred to a particular innovation, but the intellectual efforts that it entailed and the social benefits that it engendered—that is to say, the entire processes by which practical challenges and universal needs were confronted and met. The form of an object thus reflected the “inventive faculty” of the peoples who made it. Mason thus organized his exhibits according to technology in order to compare and contrast how different peoples approached similar situations.

“The Synoptic History of Inventions: Knife, Saw, Borer, and Scraper” display that Mason may have designed for a trade fair, like the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, is a quintessential example of his approach to exhibition design (fig. 82). The case included objects used to cut, sever, or incise materials—from animal flesh to wood, stone, and hard metals. The technological categories into which the objects were divided (namely, knife, saw, borer and scraper) were based on the name as well as form of such objects in industrial, Western society—instances of which appear at the right-hand edge of the display case. These objects are preceded by similar looking and functioning objects from other peoples and places. Almost all of the specimens are presented in their own distinct sections and accompanied by a label, and the sections are arranged in a teleological trajectory from “simple” to “complex”: from natural resources that have barely been shaped to stream-lined mechanical tools. The display thus

256 *The Synoptic History of Inventions: Knife, Saw, Borer, and Scraper*. Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 95, #image 23267.
constituted an evolutionary continuum; the objects became more “sophisticated” as the case unfolded. As Mason detailed in *The Origins of Invention: A Study of Industry among Primitive Peoples*, the materials and processes by which the objects were made as well as the gains that they yielded became increasingly complex, too. He wrote, “in fact, the study of industry is the story of the greater diversity of materials used, of the more complicated thought in the mind of the inventors, of the perfection of tools and processes, which take the place of hands and feet and brain, and, lastly, of the final causes of the products of men’s brains and hands.” It was a teleological trajectory towards modern society as he understood it—in which the materials, ideas, and benefits that constitute invention became more efficient, effective, and profitable. Each object represented an advance on those that had come before it. As the case outlined and illustrated the history of technology, then, by extension, it also established a hierarchy among the cultures that produced them according to Mason’s perception of how those cultures met the need for a knife, saw, borer and scraper—or, in other words, of their cognitive abilities.

The case was thus premised upon Mason’s belief that civilization was absolute rather than relative. He contended that all people, the world over, created objects for the same reasons. These objects were not the product of individual practices and beliefs, but solutions to practical situations or problems. Mason subscribed to the opinion that similar inventions existed in different parts of the world because of, as Boas put it:

1. The migration of a certain race of people who made the invention. 2. The migration of ideas—that is, an invention may be made by a certain race or people and taught or loaned to peoples far removed in time or place. 3. In human culture, as in nature elsewhere, like causes produce like effects. Under the same stress and resources the same inventions will arise.

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He attributed the formal and technical similarities between the objects in his care to the migration of peoples or ideas (in the form of things) or, more fundamentally, to an inherent response to the environment—both the challenges and resources that it provided. Boas adamantly disagreed with this proposition. He firmly believed that “unlike causes produce like effects.” Or, in other words, that objects that look similar may, in fact, have been created and used for widely different purposes. Boas offered this example:

The rattle, for instance, is not merely the outcome of the idea of making noise, and of the technical methods applied to reach this end: it is, besides this, the outcome of religious conception, as any noise may be applied to invoke or drive away spirits; or it may be the outcome of the pleasure children have in noise of any kind; and its form may be characteristic of the art of the people. The rattle was not simply defined by the sound that it made or the form that it took, but the reason why it had been created, which Boas believed could reveal much about the people (the culture) that made and used it.

Boas, then, was interested in the “psychology” or “character” of a people. As opposed to Mason and his quasi-scientific methods, he championed an historical approach to ethnographic material. Boas asserted “that classification is not explanation.” He argued that categories and comparison could not explain how and why an object was used and, thus, why it was important. It could only highlight what forms were or were not common to disparately located peoples and, so, indicate potential areas of study. Rather, Boas believed that objects should be understood within the context in which they were used. He asserted that “by regarding a single implement outside of its surroundings, outside of other inventions of the people to whom it belongs, and outside of other phenomena affecting that people and its productions, we cannot understand its

259 Boas, Science (May 20, 1887), 485.
260 Boas, Science (June 17, 1887), 228.
261 Boas, Science (June 17, 1887), 228.
262 Boas, Science (May 20, 1887), 485.
meaning.” Boas was interested in the role an object played in the life of a people—the significance that it held to them. He thus advocated that ethnographic exhibitions be organized by “tribe” rather than by object. By way of example, he suggested that:

From a collection of string instruments, flutes, or drums of ‘savage’ tribes and the modern orchestra, we cannot derive any conclusion but that similar means have been applied by all peoples to make music. The character of their music, the only object worth studying, which determines the form of the instruments, cannot be understood from the single instrument, but requires a complete collection of the single tribe. Boas’s goal, then, was to learn about a people—their beliefs and practices, or culture—through the objects that they made and how as well as why they used them.

He was thus an early advocate of the life group. The life group was a display of mannequins engaged in particular tasks. For example, an installation from the Northwest Coast Hall in the American Museum of Natural History in New York, where Boas came to work in 1895, demonstrated the many uses to which the Kwakiutl put yellow and red cedar bark (fig. 83); the glass-walled case contained four figures—three adults working with the bark and a baby in a wooden cradle. A description of the case from the guidebook to Hall 105: Ethnological Collections from the North Pacific Coast of America, written by Boas, reads:

A woman is seen making a cedar-bark mat, rocking her infant, which is bedded in cedar-bark, the cradle being moved by means of a cedar-bark rope attached to her toe. Another woman is shredding cedar-bark, to be used for making aprons. A man is taking red-hot stones out of the fire with tongs made of cedar-wood, and is about to place the stones in a cedar box. The Indians have no kettles or pots, but cook in boxes, heating the water by means of red-hot stones. A second man is engaged in painting a box. A young woman is drying fish over the fire.

The case, then, shows how the bark was used, but, in the process, it also illustrates how various objects in Kwakiutl society were made from the bark; one woman shreds it to make an apron,

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while another uses it to make a mat. Boas thus used the objects and their creation to provide insight into the daily life of the Kwakiutl (and, thereby, demonstrated the extent to which their lives in fact revolved around the creation and use of such objects). The life group presented the lifecycle of such objects and, by extension, the lifestyle of the people who made them.

For the cultures that Mason and Boas studied, a borer, scraper, rattle, and cedar-bark cradle were things that they made and used in order to live and survive. They were crafted from natural materials in order to make, perform, and do other things—be they practical, spiritual, and/or social. Despite the differences between their curatorial styles, when Mason and Boas put these objects on display, they sought to provide insight into the ephemeral conditions that had produced them. For Mason, that meant a culture’s intellectual abilities; for Boas, their customs and beliefs. The object became the material expression of these things, of how the people who made and used it thought—be it in a technical way or in cultural terms. In order to make those claims—to enable an object to be seen in such a way—both Mason and Boas situated these objects into broader narratives. Mason organized them into a teleological trajectory, which suggested that human civilization was a progressive development towards contemporary Western society; whereas Boas presented them in situ—being made and used by mannequins created for this purpose.

To put a defunct or aged object on display was thus to “tell a story,” as Harnett himself described his own compositional strategy and goal in his only surviving interview. 266 As he had said, he tried to “group [his] figures so as to try and make an artistic composition.” In the case of works like The Faithful Colt, that composition—a weathered revolver paired with a tattered newspaper clipping against equally battered wooden paneling—thus resonated with the kinds of

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exhibits created by Mason and Boas; in fact, it appears to be a hybrid of their two approaches: the gun is presented in context, if not in use, against a flat background and accompanied by a “text panel.” But that panel, or clipping, is most noteworthy for being completely illegible; the black striations on the light greyish ground gesture towards letters, sentences, and paragraphs (the news item that the clipping was intended to preserve is clearly composed of two “paragraphs” and a “headline”) but do not resolve into them. Harnett did not want to say something about the revolver per se so much as to craft his painting into a display and, as such, into something like a scene that incarnated human culture in both its subject matter and its composition. Given the curatorial conventions of his day, the combination of gun plus clipping would suggest that a narrative was inscribed into the very form of the painting itself—a narrative that had everything to do with the “curator” behind it and the ways in which he had manipulated the objects on display like others had once transformed raw materials into those very objects.

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Despite its formal similarity to the ethnographic exhibits curated by Boas and Mason, though, The Faithful Colt was nonetheless not a display case but, quite emphatically, a painting. For all its veracity, the newspaper clipping was a conglomeration of black strokes on a light greyish ground, and the peeled and chipped paneling would have contrasted markedly (rather than blended in) with the smoothly painted walls on which the work hung. Harnett clearly reveled in depicting these materials: paper and wood. He rendered the thin wisps that signify that the clipping was cut from a larger piece of newspaper, defined the wrinkles that resulted when the clipping was stuck to the wood, and dog-eared its upper-right-hand corner to demonstrate its
fragility. By contrast, the wood was durable, resilient even. Every crack, loss, and rust-stain substantiated its bulk; every chip in its paint revealed the natural hue below its Hunter green veneer. (This is in contrast to the wood paneling in the After the Hunt paintings and game pieces, which was immaculate—a perfectly smooth surface, rather than a substantive thing.) This kind of attention to detail is what prompted one reviewer to exclaim, in reference to another work by the artist, “the wood is wood, the iron is iron, the brass is brass, the leather is leather.” 267 But of course, as he goes on to point out, it was not; it was all paint that had been applied and molded so as to evoke, if not actually replicate, these textures.

Outside of condition reports conducted by individual museums, the only concerted examination of Harnett’s work took place on the occasion of his touring retrospective in 1993, when infrared reflectography and X radiography was performed on eight of his paintings from different points in his career in the conservation lab at The Metropolitan Museum of Art. 268 In consultation with conservators, art historian Jennifer Milam analyzed the images to determine the role of drawing in Harnett’s practice and, in the process, provided great insight into his technique. 269 She noted that “beginning with the background, he built up his compositions by painting complete objects, one on top of the other.” 270 First, Harnett applied a thick ground to the canvas in vertical strokes, which obscured the natural weave of the canvas and mimicked the grain of the wooden support he would paint on top of it. He then scored the ground, likely with the back of his brush, or added sand to the canvas in order to emphasize—if not actually create—the cracks and splits that would mar the wood. Harnett then painted each object individually; that

268 Unfortunately, extensive correspondence and discussion with conservators and curators at the Metropolitan Museum of Art suggests that the x-radiographs have been lost. The x-rays survive and are held within the Conservation Department at the Museum.
270 Milam, 172.
is to say, he did not work disparate parts of the canvas simultaneously. He rendered each element one at a time and, if layered, in the order that they would rest on the support in reality; for example, in *The Artist’s Letter Rack*, the cards and envelopes were painted before the ribbons that “secure” them to the wooden support. Finally, as the conservation report on *The Meerschaum Pipe* in the collection of The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco reveals, “examination of the ‘print’ newspaper clipping indicated that Harnett painted short horizontal strokes in black over the white paint and then lifted off portions of the black paint with a brush or other instrument to create the illusion of typed letters.”  

Harnett thus used a kind of additive technique to build up the surfaces of his canvases. It was a laborious process that, to an extent and in paint on canvas, mimicked how his models themselves were made.

Yet, despite the labor he expended on *The Faithful Colt* and his other paintings, Harnett’s work has been regarded as distinctly mechanical in appearance and feel. David Lubin articulates this pervasive sentiment in his account of the artist’s work: “the increased interest in highly detailed, precisionistically rendered, ultrarealistic depictions of everyday objects corresponded to public fascination with scientific inquiry, photographic realism, and intricate machinery, all of which were continually praised in the popular press and extolled at such forums as the Centennial Exhibition.”  

He describes the culture (and popularity) of meticulously, if not mechanically, produced images at the time and situates Harnett’s work within it. The artist’s style is thus highly technical, and his paintings perfunctory. In fact, at the outset of his discussion, Lubin explains that he writes “impersonally,” “coolly,” and “dispassionately” in this chapter—as opposed to insistently and fervently, as he does throughout the rest of *Picturing a Nation*—because the work is “impersonal,” “cool,” and “dispassionate,” “predicated upon the

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272 Lubin, 276.
suppression of authorial presence.”273 His writing, like Harnett’s work, does not convey emotion, but information. Lubin acknowledges that it is as impossible for prose, as for painting, to be “objective,” yet his interpretation is nonetheless premised upon the elision of Harnett’s role, presence, or hand in the work.274 The paintings all but produced themselves.

At the time, however, the incredible veracity of the work was understood as the product of immense labor and skill. In his Dec. 12, 1890 review for The Epoch, Frank Listow White noted that The Faithful Colt—then on display at Black, Start, and Frost—exhibited the “painstaking care so characteristic of Harnett.”275 Writing on other works, critics over and again referred to Harnett’s “extraordinary skill,”276 as well as his technical “excellence.”277 A reviewer for the Springfield Daily Republican was sure to mention that it had taken seven months for him to paint Ease,278 while The New York Times obituary for the artist noted that he “painted very rapidly.”279 These critics marveled at Harnett’s dexterity even as some of them critiqued its limited application—to still life. The Minneapolis Tribune printed the sermon of a Baptist minister on “The Choice of Pictures for the Home,” which was based on a local exhibit that included Harnett’s The Old Violin. The minister noted the painting’s “accuracy” and “vividness,” but decried its content: “the picture conveys no worthy thought or emotion.”280 In 1879, Clarence Cook of The New York Tribune used his review of the annual exhibition at the National Academy as an opportunity to condemn still life in general and Harnett in particular; he wrote “…it is evident that only time and industry are necessary to the indefinite multiplication of them

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273 Lubin, 273.
274 Lubin, 273.
275 "Frank Liston White, “Art Notes,” The Epoch: 300-301.
As pictures of inanimate objects, Harnett’s paintings were seen as the product of sheer labor.

The Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society, which burgeoned at this point, championed the hand-made as an alternative to mass production as well as a solution to its deleterious effects on the arts, the worker, and society. Its writings, or those of its members, can thus reveal what it meant for something, including Harnett’s paintings, to be seen as the product of skill in late-nineteenth-century America. The Society was a loose association of craftsmen—from architects and bookbinders to illustrators and furniture designers, among many others—who organized exhibitions, held lectures, and published essays that advocated for design; specifically, they wanted craft to be considered among, and equal with, the pictorial arts. The Exhibition Society believed that large-scale industrial manufacturing had divested the decorative arts of their beauty and artistry; “the demand, artificially stimulated,” wrote illustrator Walter Crane in his introduction to a comprehensive anthology of the Society’s writings, “is less for thought or beauty than for novelty, and all sort of mechanical invention are applied, chiefly with the view of increasing the rate of production and diminishing its cost…” Mass production was governed by fashion and profit (the dictates of the marketplace, as Marx suggested in Capital) rather than quality and taste. The worker was thereby subsumed within the “brand,” and the consumer induced to look for trends rather than good craftsmanship. Crane noted that “the very producer, the designer, and craftsman, too, has been lost sight of, and his personality submerged in that of a business firm, so that we have reached the reductio ad absurdum of an impersonal artist or

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craftsman trying to produce things of beauty for an impersonal and unknown public—a purely conjectural matter from first to last.” He argues that the worker and the consumer had become abstractions in the face of mechanical reproduction. It had sapped the “…labour, skill, taste, intelligence, thought, and fancy, which give the sense of art to the work…,” rendering the products purely functional, and alienating the people who made and used them.

The Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society was established to counter this turn. It wanted to restore design to the level of the pictorial arts, with their respect for the individual. “It is a protest,” wrote Crane in the same introduction, “against that so-called industrial progress which produces shoddy wares, the cheapness of which is paid for by the lives of their producers and the degradation of their users. It is a protest against the turning of men into machines, against artificial distinctions in art, and against making the immediate market value, or possibility of profit, the chief test of artistic merit.” Mass production had devalued labor, the worker, and the products that he produced; they had all been reduced to monetary sums. The Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society wanted to see things like wallpaper, furniture, and embroidery approached as art rather than commodities. Crane claimed that, “…there is not the simplest article of common use made by the hand of man that is not capable of receiving some touch of art—whether it lies in the planning and proportions, or in the final decorative adornment; whether in the work of the smith, the carpenter, the carver, the weaver, or the potter, and the other indispensable crafts.” This “touch of art,” this notion of “beauty” to which Crane refers over and again, inhered in how the object was designed. It should not be dictated by cost or by fashion—by parameters outside of the object itself. Rather, Crane argued that “…every material has its own proper capacity and

284 Crane, 10-11.
285 Crane, 19.
286 Crane, 13.
287 Crane, 9.
appropriate range of expression, so that it becomes the business of the sympathetic workman to
discover this and give it due expression.” The workman was to respond to his chosen
material—to its limits and proclivities.

Each of the thirty-four contributions to Arts and Crafts Essays by Members of the Arts and
Crafts Exhibition Society thereby addressed a different medium or technique—from textiles,
wallpaper, stained glass, stucco and gesso, cast iron, and lace to metalwork, stone and wood
carving, and embroidery, among many others. In “Of Decorative Painting and Design,” Walter
Crane explores the distinction between “easel painting” and the “decorative arts,” or the fine and
applied arts, as they are known today—a distinction that he claims was initiated by industrial
production in the nineteenth century. An “easel picture,” he claimed, “is not necessarily related
to anything but itself; its painter is not bound to consider anything outside its own
dimensions…” It was entirely divorced from its surroundings, its context. Instead, the picture
was defined by its subject matter:

…the demand for literal presentment of the superficial facts or phases of nature
often removes the painter and his picture still farther from the architectural,
decorative, and constructive artist and the handicraftsman, who are bound to think
of plan, and design, and materials—of the adaptation of their work, in short—
while the painter seeks only to be an unbiased recorder of all accidents and
sensational conditions of nature and life,—and so we get our illustrated
newspapers on a grand scale.

The easel painter was committed to the scene that he depicted; he was, as Crane saw it, enslaved
by his subject matter, to which his own work had to be loyal.

The decorative artist or painter, however, was not beholden to such constraints. He had to
suit his work to the object and/or context in which was to appear. Yet, there were standards by

288 Crane, 8.
289 Walter Crane, “Of Decorative Painting and Design,” Arts and Crafts Essays by Members of The Arts and Crafts
Exhibition Society (London and Bombay: Longmans Green and Co., 1893), 41.
290 Crane, 41–42.
which this work could or should be judged: “does the design fit its place and material: Is it in scale with its surroundings and in harmony with itself? Is it fair and lovely in colour? Has it beauty and invention? Has it thought and poetic feeling?” 291 These are rather vague questions, but they suggest an interest in formal and practical concerns that Crane believed distinguished decorative painting from easel painting. In fact, he went on to provide the following corresponding criteria that the decorative painter should bear in mind as he or she worked: “if truth is the object of the modern painter of pictures—truth as distinct from or opposed to beauty—beauty is certainly the object of the decorative painter, but beauty not necessarily severed from truth. Without beauty, however, decoration has no reason for existence; indeed, it can hardly be said to exist.” 292 The craftsman was thus liberated to attend to the visual parameters of his work (in fact, Crane began this essay with the assertion that the phrase “decorative painting” was itself ludicrous because it implied another kind of painting that was not decorative, which did not “primarily and pre-eminently [appeal] to the eye.” 293). Crane continues,

>A decorative painting should highlight rather than obscure its support. The craftsman, then, had to negotiate between his material and these practical demands. Whether he was cognizant of these ideas or not, Harnett observed similar principles in his own work. Unlike mid-century

291 Crane, 43.
292 Crane, 42.
293 Crane, 39.
294 Crane, 42-43.
landscape painters like Frederic Church, who had designed the frame for *The Heart of the Andes* to underscore and even amplify the depth of the landscape that he had depicted “within” the canvas, Harnett exploited and even exacerbated the materiality and very substance of the picture plane. By rendering it a series of weather worn wooden planks and placing as well as layering objects upon them, Harnett not only treated the canvas as a surface to be underscored rather then overcome—as he had in the game paintings and *After the Hunts*—but announced it as an object itself. He used paint to establish as well as assert the depth of the canvas and, as such, crafted as well as framed the painting as something made of raw material and skill. The wooden support, tattered newspaper clipping, and even rusted gun displayed wear, revealed the materials of which they were ostensibly made, and thereby *looked* real as a result of the layers of paint as well as detritus that Harnett applied to the canvas.

Walter Crane and the other exponents of the Arts & Crafts Movement argued that mass production had severed design from fabrication and, so, the producer from the consumer. It had divested the objects of everyday life of the vitality and individuality that came from the designer-craftsman’s personal contact with his materials. The Arts & Crafts Movement sought to resuscitate skill and thereby restore humanity to the home and, by extension, modern life. They wanted to see things like furniture, embroidery, and even ornamental painting approached organically; they were to be developed—*designed*—by negotiating between the site where they would be placed and the materials—be it wood, fabric, or paint, for example—that would constitute them. It was a process—one built upon actions as well as decisions (and, further, the actions and decisions of one person such that these two activities—the conception and execution of the object—were at best concurrent). When critics like Clarence Cook said that Harnett’s paintings were nothing but the product of time and skill, they were deriding their subject matter,
but they were also recognizing the intense work and labor by which the paintings were made—that things like *The Faithful Colt* were the result of painstaking manual efforts. The writings of Walter Crane and the principles behind the Arts & Crafts Movement both suggest and reveal the thought and decisions inscribed within the physical work by which Harnett realized his pictures. It started with the selection of his models, continued with the way in which they were composed, and extended to the various techniques that the artist employed so as to render the textures of those objects. In fact, in the only surviving interview with Harnett, he says that “the chief difficulty I have found has not been the grouping of my models, but their choice. To find a subject that paints well is not an easy task.”295 The multiple versions of all of the single-object paintings thus testify to the way in which he arranged and re-arranged those models upon the model support as well as on the canvas. A rare and wonderful photograph of Alexander Pope (fig. 84), Harnett’s contemporary, shows the artist seated at his easel, on which rests a painting that is an exact replica of all the models, including the wooden support, sitting beside it; the photo, which appears in Cécile Whiting’s article on Harnett, thus serves as an important reminder of the extended process of which the paintings were the end result. Harnett collected, selected, and arranged his models well before they ever even appeared in paint on canvas. Each element in the painting was then rendered in a manner that reflected the style in which the model for it was actually made; in *The Faithful Colt*, the wooden panels were created in layers; the gun was molded on top of them; and the text was raised off the “paper” on which it was “printed.” The narrative that the painting told—and that critics picked up on, if derided—was thus the very acts and decisions, the process, in all its technical detail, by which Harnett made it. *The Faithful Colt* may have depicted an ivory and steel revolver, tattered newspaper clipping, and a rustic

wooden support, but, as something that announced itself as an object by virtue of the skill with which the painting was rendered, it *represented* the manual as well as intellectual labor that it took to produce it.

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Traditionally, *The Faithful Colt* and the other single-object paintings, not to mention Harnett’s work more generally, have been labeled “trompe l’oeil” and understood as attempts to deceive the viewer. The artist’s imperceptible brushwork has been seen as a way to obviate, even undermine, his role in the work such that the objects themselves stood forth as “real.” But contemporary critics were quick to attribute the paintings to the time and skill that Harnett invested in them, if only to dismiss them on these very same grounds. They argued that, if anything, Harnett’s works affirmed his own abilities over and above any deeper meaning—that his skill was squandered on still life, which simply called for quotidian objects to be selected, arranged, and reproduced. But the writings of people like Karl Marx, Franz Boas, Otis T. Mason, and Walter Crane, which came from a range of fields invested in different aspects of human society, suggest that such objects, whether commodities or crafts, art or mere things, had deep cultural significance related to the way in which they were made, used, and displayed. Whether produced by machine or by hand, shown in stores or exhibitions—according to their function or their shape—in late-nineteenth-century America, an “object” was understood as something man made. To be sure, economists, scientists, and craftsmen were beginning to parse this designation into the stark subdivisions cited above and used today, but, fundamentally, it referred to all entities that could not be classified as natural. The intellectual as well as manual activity by
which they were made distinguished them from organic things even as it invested them with humanity, albeit to varying extents depending on the precise processes involved.

This designation, “object,” applies to the subjects pictured in Harnett’s paintings as well as the works themselves. As he selected and arranged his models in actuality and rendered them on canvas, the artist engaged in similar activities as the craftsmen discussed by Marx, Boas, Mason, and Crane. But, further, and even more importantly, he made those activities the very subject of his work (much to the disappointment of contemporary critics, whose words nonetheless testify to the project’s success). Harnett depicted worn objects in exhibit-like displays that (by way of their resonance with the thinking about objects and museums more generally at the time) announce the paintings’ status as things that had been designed and then molded out of material (in this case, paint) just like the gun, horseshoe, and pipes at the heart of them. The aged subjects, didactic composition, and laborious technique that Harnett used to create *The Faithful Colt* and paintings like it—not to mention the way their wooden planks would stand out from the smooth walls at a place like Black, Starr, and Frost—asserted their materiality as objects (versus illusions). As such, they embodied as well as narrated the process by which they themselves were made—the physical gestures and the psychic decisions through which Harnett realized them.

These gestures and decisions are what contemporary critics saw when they looked at Harnett’s work: not a real gun, but the work required to make it look real. Yet, judging by their awed if critical response, those efforts and the artist responsible for them are not what they expected or hoped to see in a painting. They were interested in loftier subjects than the quotidian objects that Harnett depicted as well as the historical, moral, and scientific messages that things like portraits, genre scenes, and landscapes were seen to evoke or even symbolize. But since his
earliest tabletop still lifes, Harnett had been compelled to find a way to enable painting to communicate through (rather than in spite of) the picture plane and to do more than illustrate the visible world—a task to which the brochures that often had to accompany paintings suggested that the medium was ill suited. He increasingly looked to literary strategies in order to accomplish these goals, and the technique that he employed to make works like *The Faithful Colt* was no exception. In his earliest work, Harnett took up literary subjects; in his game paintings and *After the Hunts*, he composed the canvas as a kind of text and, in works like *The Faithful Colt*, in which aged and weathered objects were depicted by means of meticulous brushwork, Harnett rendered the canvas itself by way of a style not unlike writing. The rust-ridden revolver, tattered newspaper clipping, and weathered wooden planks were not painted by way of broad, visible, loose strokes, but detailed, meticulous, imperceptible marks that had to have been made with incredibly controlled brushwork. Harnett used them to mold paint into the shape as well as texture of steel, paper, and wood. He thus approached painting as the act of “writing the forms of objects,” as Rembrandt Peale had described the practice of drawing in *Graphics*. As such, Harnett’s approach to painting the revolver, newspaper, and planks was not unlike the process by which people like Walter Crane advocated that objects be made as well as decorated. It was a manual as well as intellectual activity that inscribed its product with the humanity (as ineffable as it may be) of the person responsible for them, as evidenced by the way that critics recognized Harnett in his paintings. As he built up the canvas, then, Harnett also inscribed himself within its material surface and, as such, actually mobilized the picture plane as well as the process of painting on it with the ability to communicate his mentality as the works were being made, as contemporaneous scholars like Noah Porter theorized that writing and reading functioned. The paintings that resulted—works like *The Faithful Colt*—pictured weathered objects and, thereby, [296 Peale, 6.]
the extended process as well as the person that produced them. They did not trick the eye of the viewer so much as represent the mind of the artist as he crafted things like guns, horseshoes, and pipes in and as paint.
In 1886, the same year that Harnett produced most of what I have called his single-object works, he also made *The Old Violin* (fig. 85). Like its cohorts, this painting pictures its eponymous subject, a 1724 Cremona violin, in the center of a canvas painted to look like a series of wooden planks. But, in addition to its bow and the standard illegible newspaper clipping, the violin is also accompanied by musical scores, which hang behind it, and by an envelope—that is tucked into the bottom hinge below it. Almost ten years later, for reasons unknown today, one of the artist’s most adventurous patrons, businessman George Hulings, narrated his understanding of the painting’s origins to the Philadelphia *Item.*

Hulings believed that *The Old Violin* was the realization of a commission that he had given the artist for a painting of a fiddle. By his account, Harnett had finished the work, but was unsatisfied with the results, and Hulings did not get a chance to see and judge it for himself before Harnett fell ill and the work was removed from his studio by the commissioners of the Cincinnati Industrial Exposition, who proceeded to sell the work to local lithographer Frank Tuchfarber. Apparently unbeknownst to Harnett, Tuchfarber then took it upon himself to make and sell prints of the painting. Printed on glass or paper, the prints (figs. 86-87) achieved a much wider audience and circulation than the original painting. But, as such, they underscore the fact that Harnett’s paintings were also things that circulated—specifically, from the artist to his (albeit more limited) audience. Further, they dramatize, if in reverse, the fact that Harnett’s work was often made for a specific patron or client, who would view it at length and in person.

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his paintings that were shown in commercial venues, the artist also produced a fair amount of work for individual people and private spaces, particularly in what would be the final years of his life.

By the late 1880s, when Hulings made his commission, Harnett was at what would be the pinnacle of his career. In her essay on the artist’s patrons, Doreen Bolger notes that “from 1886 to 1892, Harnett seems to have enjoyed continuous and remunerative patronage, regularly receiving payment well in the four figures for his work.” 298 He had established solid relationships with prominent Philadelphia businessmen like dry-goods merchants Nathan Thomas Folwell and William Hazelton Folwell, art collectors like Thomas B. Clarke, and industrialist and collector William B. Bement. These men purchased Harnett’s work, and Harnett also—as the anecdote above suggests—at times made works specifically for them. 299 Some scholars have taken the fact that Harnett worked with patrons or clients as grounds to dismiss or at least bracket his own investment in his paintings even as they acknowledge its undeniable interest as well as the immense skill with which it was made. 300 But Harnett’s late paintings, which coincide with the years of his most active patronage, exhibit a distinct shift from the single object works both in subject matter and in the way that subject matter is presented that suggests and exhibits an explicit interest in the viewer and, more so, his relationship to the artist via the painting. Towards what would be the end of his career, Harnett introduced a new subject into his oeuvre: musical scores and instruments that were juxtaposed with popular and recognizable

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299 See, for example, Doreen Bolger, “Cards and Letters from His Friends: Mr. Hulings’s Rack Picture by William Michael Harnett,” American Art Journal 22, no. 2 (1990) in which Bolger discusses an earlier commission by the artist for this collector.
300 For example, in their chapters on the artist, Michael Leja and David Lubin interpret how the paintings were received within the economic and social circumstances of their day. By contrast, given the cultural conditions in which Harnett worked, I understand the way that the works were received as inseparable from how they were made; in fact, as detailed in this chapter, the viewer was a fundamental consideration in Harnett’s process and project.
books as well as decorative objects that all contrasted markedly with the insistently functional objects pictured in his most recent work. Further, no longer was the canvas dominated by one central object; now, a multitude of often quite unrelated things was presented together in seemingly haphazard fashion. In his earliest paintings, Harnett had grouped his subjects thematically: the pencil, quill pen, crayon, and letter-opener in Secretary’s Table spoke to writing; the letter, newspaper, and leather-bound books in Still Life with Letter to Thomas B. Clarke, to reading. But in works like The Old Cupboard Door, 1889 (fig. 88) and Ease, 1887 (fig. 89), Harnett depicted an assortment of things associated with culture either scattered across a canvas painted to look like a cupboard or clustered and cluttered upon an ornately dressed table in some kind of interior. In both subject and strategy, then, these works exhibit an interest in composition: in musical and literary works that have been written, and in what it means to juxtapose such objects on and within the canvas. For Harnett’s decision to present works of art as well as objets d’art in ostensible disarray is a compositional strategy in and of itself, and one that warrants exploration given the significance of the collage-like and didactic approaches that he took in his early tabletop works and single-object paintings, respectively, but also given the idiosyncrasy of this strategy in the late-nineteenth-century art world. While it would become common or at least acceptable for artists working almost a century later to juxtapose random objects within a delimited space, in Harnett’s day this practice was as radical in the pictorial arena as it was standard within other areas of American culture.

301 The way that Harnett arranges objects on the surface of the canvas calls to mind Robert Rauschenberg’s combines. The formal parallels between these bodies of work merit attention for what they might reveal about both projects, particularly given that the resonance between them was recognized in Rauschenberg’s own day—namely, in a paper that Bruce Conner wrote at the University of Nebraska in 1954. According to Conner, the (unlocated) paper looked at the relationship between late-nineteenth-century still-life paintings by Harnett and Peto and the practice of collage. (Oral history interview with Bruce Conner, 1974 Aug. 12, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.) I thank Kevin Hatch for bringing Conner’s paper to my attention.
At the time, the way that disparate objects could be arranged to produce meaning was a subject of great interest in a variety of disciplines—from education to psychology to interior design. Either in theory or in practice, thinkers (and doers) like John F. Genung, John Dewey, and William Merritt Chase suggested that the way things were juxtaposed in space enabled the transmission of ideas between people across it. It rendered that space—be it the page, the mind, or the studio—into a physical means of intellectual exchange. As such, the (in most cases, lesser) work of these figures can help explain what it would mean for Harnett to compile multiple, unrelated objects—and, further, objects that themselves could be considered works of art—both upon and within a canvas painted to evoke the inside of a home. Much has been written and made of the hyperbolic accounts, circulated in newspapers as well as art historical lore, of how people reacted to Harnett’s paintings, how they tried to touch the objects within them or thought that they were real. This work has understandably concentrated on Harnett’s trompe l’oeil “style” and tried to understand the social conditions that may have precipitated and even necessitated it. But the significance of composition in American culture more generally in this period establishes a relationship between the viewer and the subjects, the objects and the setting of Harnett’s late work. It posits his patrons as “built-in” viewers, who were thus an integral aspect of the paintings in a way that had something, if not everything, to do with what it meant for something to be a composition. The uses and discussions of this practice in the fields of pedagogy, psychology, and interior design can thus suggest what Harnett may have understood the very purpose of his work to be. These disciplines reveal that things like deception, skepticism, and the like—lenses through which Harnett’s work has been interpreted—were actually part of a much broader concern with knowledge and, in particular, the procedures of its transmission and circulation.
Harnett’s late paintings are filled with plays, novels, and a profusion of sheet music as well as the kinds of instruments on which such scores might be performed. Scholars like Judy L. Larson, Carol Oja, Marc Simpson, and Jennifer Hardin, among others, have done much work to uncover and detail the iconography of these objects.\textsuperscript{302} The Old Cupboard Door, for example, includes a Spanish edition of Don Quixote and an old volume of Shakespeare’s Tragedies, as well as a sheet of music that contains passages from both La Dernière Rose d’Été (with added lyrics by Thomas Moore) and Bellini’s Norma. A volume in My Gems, 1888 (fig. 90) includes both Shakespeare’s Hamlet and his Troilus and Cressida, while the score comes from the Verdi opera Rigoletto. The Old Violin pictures both its eponymous subject and a sheet of music that combines Bellini’s La Sonnambula with passages from Hélas, Quelle Douleur; both the opera and instrument reappear in Ease, which also includes the Bible and many other books. The music to La Flute Enchantée is prominently featured in Harnett’s painting of that name along with the instrument on which it would be played and an old volume of Dante’s Divine Comedy—a bound volume that pops up again and again in works like Still Life with Tankard to Still Life with Bust of Dante, 1883 (fig. 91) to The Last Rose of Summer, 1886 (fig. 92), where it appears with the score for the eponymous piece of music (also seen in The Old Cupboard Door). King Richard III and Romeo and Juliet are both depicted in Still Life, 1888, which also includes Hélas, Quelle Douleur. In their essays for the catalogue of the Harnett retrospective, Marc Simpson and Judy

\textsuperscript{302} Hardin, Larson, and Simpson identify many of the books and scores in Harnett’s paintings in their respective essays for the William M. Harnett catalogue: “The Late Years,” “Literary References in Harnett’s Still-life Paintings,” and “Harnett and Music: Many a Touching Melody.” Carol Oja has written and published on music in Harnett’s work, most extensively in: Musical Subjects in the Paintings of William Michael Harnett (Master’s Thesis, School of Music, Graduate College of the University of Iowa, 1976). The information in this paragraph gratefully draws on their meticulous research.
L. Larson assert that Harnett was interested in the heavy themes raised by these musical and literary sources. Operas like Bellini’s *Norma* and epics like the *Divine Comedy* introduced love, death, and gravitas into his work and displayed the artist’s “erudition” and “values.” The themes attributed to these texts (broadly understood) were understood to be the themes of the paintings, as well. But the paintings do not reveal or articulate the narratives contained within these books and scores; one might bring this knowledge to them, but it cannot be gleaned from the paintings themselves. Rather, seen and presented together in close proximity within a painting, the books and scores read as cultural products or works of art, literary and musical modes of expression, or, in other words, things that have been composed.

Plays by William Shakespeare and operas by Italian composers like Bellini and Rossini were among the most common public entertainments throughout the nineteenth century. They were performed in theaters and concert halls as well as on flatboats and in churches. But they were also read, studied, and recited in schools and parlors across the country with the aid of the composition and elocution manuals that were so popular at the time. In late-nineteenth-century America, composition and oratory were the two most popular and important branches of rhetoric, which also encompassed such things as belle lettres. Literary historian Nan Johnson describes rhetoric as “the philosophical investigation of discourse and formal instruction in oral and written communication” as well as the “branch of liberal philosophy and education self-

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consciously concerned with discourse and the arts of expression." Rhetoric was thus the theory and practice of language in use. In contrast to theorists that would treat the discipline as an ahistorical phenomenon, Johnson argues that it is both related to—and shaped by—the intellectual and social demands of a given time and place. Thus, in nineteenth-century America did it assume what she calls a “synthetic character” that combined classical, epistemological, and belles-lettres principles, which resulted in an expansion of both its intellectual and social purview. In addition to oratory, rhetoric came to encompass and embrace composition and would cultivate one’s “mental discipline” and taste. It became “the general art of communication” and taught students how to think and express their ideas, and thus actively and positively participate in the community. Johnson points out that the study of rhetoric proceeded by way of a three-pronged approach that she calls the “theory-practice-study of models sequence,” in which students were acquainted with cognitive and technical principles as well as both classical and contemporary examples of literary achievement—from plays by Shakespeare to writings by Mark Twain. In this way, the study of composition and elocution proceeded in a manner not unlike the study of writing via manuals like Rembrandt Peale’s Graphics, which explored the purpose of effective penmanship and offered instruction in how to achieve it, but also provided examples for the student to imitate. As that manual helped explain the way that Harnett approached line in his early sketchbook, the composition and elocution manuals into which excerpts of text from Twain and Shakespeare figured can provide insight into what it meant for those texts to be pictured as compositions in Harnett’s paintings.

306 Johnson, 3.
307 Johnson, 243.
308 Johnson, 240.
309 Johnson, 237.
In nineteenth-century America, while writing was concerned with the graphic fluency of the written word, instruction in composition attended to how such words were selected and combined. Popular manuals like John S. Hart’s *First Lessons in Composition*, Richard Green Parker’s *Progressive Exercises in English Composition*, and John F. Genung’s *Outlines of Rhetoric* addressed multiple different types of compositions—namely, description, narrative, exposition, and argumentation—but all of them were constructed from the same ingredients: words, sentences, and paragraphs. The bulk of the manuals were filled with distinctly active exercises that enabled the student to practice the basic rules that were presented. For example, the rule of exposition is stated as follows: “make sure your idea is clearly defined.” This goal could be achieved by considering the origins of a word, reducing an idea to its simplest form or category, or employing simile. One was also to “reduce ideas to the concrete by example,” “secure vital points of distinction by contrast,” and “repeat enough to give all the ideas you wish to enforce.” The student was then prompted to “give accounts” of several different topics, like a ballad, jealousy, the word “pagan,” among many other things. These exercises gave students practice in how to choose words, but not necessarily in what to say. Hart said as much when he wrote that “in order to compose well, one needs to have, first of all, a knowledge of things. The knowledge of things, however, is not to be gained by the study of composition, but by general study and reading, and by the experience of life.” Likewise, Parker asserted that the two main issues confronted by the student of composition were what to write about and how: “two great obstacles beset the pupil in his first attempts at composition. The first is the difficulty of

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311 Genung, 263.
312 Genung, 263-266.
313 Genung, 267.
314 Hart, 9.
obtaining ideas (or learning to think:) the second is that of expressing them properly when obtained.” Composition used language as derived from a knowledge of things gained from experience to give form to a person’s thoughts, opinions, and ideas.

Genung likened composition to conversation and argued that its “purpose too is the same, namely, to make others see a subject as the author sees it.” Again later, he wrote that “the writer’s paramount purpose, in whatever he writes, is to make others see a subject as he sees it,--with the same clearness, the same fullness, the same power, the same beauty.” Composition enabled a writer to make his perspective available to a reader. On the flipside, elocution manuals taught students how to verbalize and articulate such texts as well as their own thoughts. To this end, they were rather uniformly divided into roughly three subject areas: voice, gesture, and selections and excerpts for practice. Some of the manuals, like J.W. Shoemaker’s Practical Elocution, included a handy chart (fig. 93) that broke down the lessons to come: speech was taught in terms of voice, articulation, and expression—each of which was further subdivided into smaller categories. Likewise, gesture encompassed position, movements of the body, and facial expression. The pursuant discussions of quite minute aspects of vocal sounds (like quality, melody, form, force, time, and stress—as Frank Fenno, another elocution manual author,

315 Parker, iii.
316 Genung, 1.
317 Genung, 2-3.
319 J.W. Shoemaker, 18-19.
categorized them) and of different ways to hold one’s hands and arms (supine, prone, vertical, pointing, clenched; front, oblique, lateral, or backward) turned the speaker or, more specifically, his body into a kind of instrument. His hands and arms as well as mouth gave corporeal and thus physical form to the words that he read in the same way that text rendered the thoughts and ideas of a writer material and thus visible. Elocution prompted a reader to internalize those thoughts and ideas and then express them through his or her body as though they were his or her own such that the reader not only echoed or voiced the words on the page, but literally embodied the thoughts and ideas that he or she transmitted.

The composition and elocution manuals that circulated in the late-nineteenth-century thus taught their readers opposite yet complementary skills: how to translate ideas into written texts and how to render written texts into seemingly spontaneous, even extemporaneous, speech. The actual physical document, then, was nothing but a transitional state—it was a medium—by which ideas were communicated and exchanged. Harnett depicts many such texts in his late work—from plays by Shakespeare and operas by Bellini to epic poems by Dante and Irish folk songs by Thomas Moore. They are the physical records of the ideas and thoughts (the “mental discipline” as well as taste) of the often-illustrious authors who composed them. But, the leather-bound volumes and scores that contain these texts rarely appear wholly intact or uncompromised.

320 Fenno, vii-xi.
321 Ironically, the stated goal of these manuals was to teach their readers how to speak and read naturally. As opposed to mere imitation, the highly detailed instruction that the manuals provided would “improve [the reader’s] manner without acquiring the formality of mannerism,” as elocutionist Alexander Melville Bell put it (xvi). They would enable the reader to animate the text and its meaning(s) as though he had in fact devised them. The body thus became a medium for text and language and, more pressingly, the thoughts and ideas that they expressed—be they one’s own or someone else’s—to the point that the body itself became text-like. In a popular turn of phrase, Fenno wrote that elocution “consists in the utterance or expression of thought” (21). Similarly, I.H. Brown notes that it “is the expression of feeling and thought by means of the voice” (1) and Shoemaker adds gesture to the definition (20). The corporeal self in its entirety was thus the medium through which these feelings and thoughts were communicated.
The titles and scores are accurately depicted, but the covers and pages of the books are torn, and passages from different works, and even genres, are often combined onto one sheet or into a single volume. Historian Lawrence Levine has described how, in the nineteenth century, performances of Shakespearean plays and Italian operas were often interspersed with other (now “lesser”) entertainments; he noted that “throughout these years audiences enjoyed the operas of Donizetti, Rossini, and Bellini alongside plays like More Blunders than One, Sam Patch in France, and Shocking Events as well as entertainment with such strong contemporary flavor as the ‘new grand military spectacle, Napoleon Bonaparte.” Likewise, when it came to theater, a play “was the centerpiece, the main attraction, but an entire evening generally consisted of a long play, an afterpiece (usually a farce), and a variety of between-act specialties.” Levine thus argued that it was not until the twentieth century that works of art became sacrosanct and inalterable; well into the nineteenth century, they were documents up for interpretation—texts to be circulated, annotated, and personalized. Harnett took similar liberties with his depiction of the books and scores in his late paintings. He often combined two songs onto one sheet and two plays into a single volume. They were texts—compositions—that had been written by prominent musicians and playwrights as well as interpreted by Harnett’s own hand; he pictured them as media, meaning material things that served as conduits between writer and reader. The scores and books by people like Bellini and Shakespeare as well as lesser-known figures in Harnett’s

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322 First and foremost a music critic himself, Alfred Frankenstein noted that Harnett was an amateur musician with first-hand knowledge of, and experience with, the scores that he depicted in his paintings. The artist played the flute, which was (despite the seeming profusion of violins in his work) the instrument that Harnett depicted the most frequently as well as the most accurately. Frankenstein pointed out that that the strings on Harnett’s violins were “always incorrectly strung” (41), and Marc Simpson added that the clarinets were “virtually unplayable” (301) because the mouthpieces were backwards. Like the functional objects in Harnett’s single-object paintings, then, these instruments were rendered obsolete and became strictly material things—shapes and forms—to be manipulated on the canvas. If the functional tools signaled the materiality of the paintings in which they appeared, these musical instruments inscribed works like The Old Cupboard and Ease with their communicative function.  

323 Levine, 90.  
324 Levine, 21.
late paintings reveal his investment in works of art as rhetorical and, thus, social instruments and thereby signal the imperatives behind his late paintings.

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If the literary and musical masterpieces pictured in Harnett’s late painting were taught as exemplars of, among other things, order and clarity, the pictorial compositions into which Harnett arranged them were anything but. Unlike the artist’s early paintings, these works do not focus on a central theme or activity (like reading or writing) nor do they display a single subject (be it animate or inanimate). They picture a plethora of objects that, for the most part, bear no logical relationship to one another. *Old Models*, 1892 (fig. 94), for example, includes instruments (namely, a violin and its bow as well as a trumpet) and a book of melodies from which a loose sheet has strayed, but also a Dutch jug sitting atop two leather-bound volumes, which sit next to yet a third. The violin appears again in *Ease*, along with a flute and an open fan, an ornate metallic vase filled with dainty flowers, a decorative mug bearing scissors, at least eight books, a newspaper, two sheets of music, and a blue envelope, which sits behind the letter that it used to contain. Similar things can also be seen in *The Old Cupboard Door*: the violin—a favorite subject of Harnett’s in this period—and its bow along with two booklets of sheet music from which one leaf has yet again strayed, a worn tambourine, three tattered books—two of which are stacked and topped by a bronze statuette and a delicate shell, two pamphlets, a little white vase replete with a pink rose and a candlestick holder bearing a white candle, a key, and a small newspaper clipping. In *Music*, 1886 (fig. 95) the same kinds of objects—books and scores, as well as a Roman lamp and a Dutch vase filled with daisy-like flowers—are all piled upon a desk.
like the one glimpsed underneath the tablecloth in *Ease*. There is no central focus in any of these paintings; the objects are simply plopped and piled beside and upon one another in a haphazard manner or scattered across the canvas. Discrete groupings do emerge here and there, but, even so, there is no real rhyme or reason to them or to how they relate to the other groupings in the painting; these discrete groupings are not based on the function or the visual and material properties of the objects that constitute them. Rather, their logic appears to derive from the formal demands of the paintings themselves.

Understanding and explaining how things relate to one another was the critical interest behind John Dewey’s *Psychology*, wherein he actually refers to the mental corollaries of physical sensations as “objects.” First published in 1887 (and revised twice in the next five years), *Psychology* was the first textbook on the subject to be published in the United States. Although William James would become the definitive figure for late-nineteenth-century American psychology, Dewey’s work in the discipline and, more specifically, the philosophical interests that informed it can help explain what it meant for someone like Harnett to bring multiple, unrelated objects into dialogue. James, like G. Stanley Hall, with whom Dewey had studied at Johns Hopkins, was a practionner of the “new psychology,” which was being pioneered by people like Wilhelm Wundt in Germany. These men appreciated a connection between the mind and the body and employed experimental methods in order to study human behavior and its motivations. As historian Robert Westbrook argues, Dewey sought to reconcile the scientific approach of the “new psychology” with “idealist metaphysics”—that is, with the philosophical (specifically, Hegelian) and spiritual interests that he shared and pursued under

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another professor at Hopkins, George Morris. He thus hoped to outline how the Absolute was realized in and by the individual. 327 Dewey explicitly declared that “the world of objects is not a series of unconnected, unrelated objects. Each is joined to every other in space and in time… We live, in short, in an ordered, harmonious world, or cosmos; not in a chaos. All objects and events are considered as members of one system; they constitute a universe, one world, in which order, connection, is the universal rule.” 328 These links and bonds were “reproduce[d],” to borrow a term from Dewey, in the mind as knowledge. 329

Sensations are the “raw material,” the data, in this process. 330 Dewey is careful to point out that sensations are not a (strictly) physical condition but a psychic phenomenon that is generated by the soul “upon occasion” of physiological changes in response to physical stimuli. 331 In this respect, he was aligned with Wilhelm Wundt and against the materialists, who understood the psychic as a reaction to the physical; like his colleagues, Dewey understood the mind as an active agent that shaped rather than merely responded to experience. 332 The mind both acted upon sensations and was also acted upon by them in two processes called apperception and retention that attended every instance of sensation. Apperception encompassed three activities (association, dissociation, and attention). Association and dissociation were related procedures; association “connect[ed] all sensations as far as possible into one total maximum experience.” 333 It united elements associated with different senses into an integrated whole. The result was “habits,” or actions that could be performed mechanically, such as “walking, talking, writing,

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328 Dewey, 82.
329 See, for example, Dewey, 3.
331 Dewey, 43.
332 Westbrook, 17-18.
333 Dewey, 93.
playing a musical instrument, etc.”.³³⁴ That is to say, it created “a connection of ideas or acts that, if one be presented, the rest of the series follow without the intervention of consciousness or the will.”³³⁵ At the same time, dissociation occurred; as opposed to association, it was not dictated by the sensations received, but by what Dewey called “interest”—the sensation’s value in relation to previous experience. Dissociation highlighted and, in a sense, liberated one of the elements combined in association. Like (and along with) association, it was a relatively mechanical activity that prepared sensations to be known; through this process, they were combined as well as delineated, if not quite yet defined.

Attention was the truly formative aspect of apperception; it invested sensations with meaning by virtue of their relations to the self. Dewey called it both a “relating activity” and a “self-developing activity.”³³⁶ It proceeded by way of three other processes (selecting, adjusting, and relating) in which the mind sought to answer questions, solve problems, or engage in other conscious activities. Sensations were isolated with reference to their future potential rather than their immediate interest; they were then idealized—the sensations lost their sensuous existence and came to stand for something else, something beyond themselves related to what the self had already experienced or knew. That process was reliant upon what Dewey called identity and difference, or unification and discrimination; these concurrent activities established a relationship between idealizations. They brought “objects apparently unlike” into dialogue on the basis of a shared meaning, which Dewey hedgingly defined as “the same psychical experience.”³³⁷ The objects were kept in suspension; they were “held before the mind

³³⁴ Dewey, 102.
³³⁵ Dewey, 112.
³³⁶ Dewey, 143 and 148, respectively.
³³⁷ Dewey, 144.
simultaneously, and yet are held apart, so that they do not fuse.” As such, they exhibited a “unity in diversity,” as Alexander von Humboldt described the physics of nature, and this assemblage constituted knowledge in Dewey’s terms. Dewey wrote that “without this ideal identification of one sensation with another, knowledge would be impossible and psychical life would consist of a series of transitory and shifting sensations, no one of which would be recognized nor referred to an object.” Attention connected presentations and united them within and through the self; it thus reconstituted the universal within the individual.

At the same time as attention developed knowledge of the outside world, retention expanded the self. Dewey made this claim as follows: “as apperception in the reaction of the self with the character given it by past experiences upon sensory presentations, so retention is the reaction of the content thus apperceived upon the self. Apperception gives character to the material apprehended. Retention gives character to the self.” Consciousness was less a storehouse of images or “copies,” as Dewey puts it, than a mode of development by which the effects of previous experiences expanded the self’s capacity to draw connections between new sensations (via apperception). To establish a relationship or connection between unlike things, then, was to generate knowledge. Apperception was the process by which the self was brought to bear on new information so as to invest it with meaning—meaning defined by the self and the experiences and ideals that it could bring to bear on this information. Dewey writes of its final stage, that attention “cannot cease until all relations have been perfectly developed; that is, until all objects, events, and minor relations stand out clearly defined in a final unity, and are recognized as

338 Dewey, 143.
340 Dewey, 144.
341 Dewey, 148.
342 Dewey, 152.
members of one whole—the self. The self constitutes the ultimate unity of all."³⁴³ Attention
developed the individual consciousness through the acquisition or, rather, the development of
knowledge. Thus, while knowledge, for Dewey, was universal, one’s awareness of it was
subjective (in fact, psychology was the study of how the self became conscious of itself and of
the fact that it knows).

A productive parallel can be drawn between Harnett’s late work and the way that Dewey
imagines and describes the procedures and implications of composition. As we have seen,
paintings like *The Old Cupboard Door* and *Ease* are littered with musical scores and literary
works that would have been understood as compositions in and of themselves and, thereby, as
the material expression of thoughts and ideas as well as the means by which they might be
transmitted. Yet, in these paintings, the musical and literary works are depicted in a seemingly
haphazard and chaotic manner. Unlike the single-object paintings, which both isolated and
displayed individual things, these works foreground the connections among disparate objects.
Harnett placed a violin beside a fan, a vase, a flute and multiple other objects in *Ease*, and a
bronze statuette with several books, a shell, a bow, and other bits of bric-a-brac in *The Old
Cupboard Door* according to what seem to be purely formal and visual concerns. The only
drawing by Harnett that can be definitively linked to a specific painting (fig. 96) pictures four
different details of (what would be) *The Old Cupboard Door*. One sketch on the approximately 8
x 5 in. piece of paper depicts an early version of the accumulated scores; another, which did not
make it into the final painting, depicts a couple of sheets that have fallen onto the shelf at the
base of the cupboard. But the other two—drawn one above the other—picture the outline of all
or part of the cupboard filled with two configurations of instruments and a couple of other
objects, most notably an almanac that shifts from the left to the right side of the

³⁴³ Dewey, 148.
composition/canvas in the lower drawing. Likewise, the violin seen in the upper sketch is replaced by a banjo, which had hung off to its side, in the lower one, and the flute is rotated to a horizontal position. Further, in the lower sketch, a cornet is substituted for the fan that appears in the upper one. Harnett introduced objects into the composition, moved them around the cupboard, and omitted from the planned painting by comparing and contrasting them with one another and the things that were already there in a manner akin to the procedures described by Dewey. Dewey argued that the mind established relationships among the objects of previous and current experiences based on both similarity and difference and that this process constituted as well as developed knowledge of the world and the self. Although his description of apperception readily conjures the image of a network, Dewey is careful to point out that the connections formulated by the mind do not exist ‘within’ it, but are in fact consciousness itself. The seemingly chaotic, but highly choreographed assemblages of scores, books, and decorative bric-a-brac in Harnett’s late paintings were created by, and also picture, a similar dynamic. Harnett arranged and rearranged these objects as authors like Shakespeare and Mark Twain did words on a page and, thereby, approached his paintings as compositions comparable to the written ones that he depicted within them. Further, whereas the didactic clarity of Harnett’s earlier paintings of one functional object on display witnessed the “curatorial” or intellectual decisions that produced them, the ostensible disorder and consequent tactility of the assemblages in these late paintings speak to the physical connections being established between the objects and thus foreground their status as compositions. As such, according to Dewey as well as the authors of the composition and elocution manuals that circulated in his and Harnett’s day, the artist’s paintings not only witness the decisions that were made in order to produce them, as had his paintings of individual objects, they picture his actual mind at work in the very process of
composing them. In Harnett’s case, this is particularly true because the preparatory drawings for works like *The Old Cupboard Door* are mere sketches—even doodles—on a scrap of paper that never realize a complete composition in general nor the one seen in the ultimate painting in particular. Harnett appears to have located and shifted objects on the canvas as he painted—a fact corroborated by Jennifer Milam’s study of x-radiographs of some of the artist’s later work.\(^{344}\) While questions of formal resonances and disparities are endemic to the practice of still life and, arguably, painting more generally, Harnett worked out these concerns as he painted and, as such, placed them at the center of his practice. Dewey’s work thereby suggests the cognitive implications of this activity when it is injected, as it is in Harnett’s late work, into the physical act of painting versus being relegated to the preparations that precede it, as in the single-object works. The messy compositions that characterize paintings like *The Old Cupboard Door* and *Ease* were not plotted in advance with an eye towards how they would look in paint; rather, they visualize as well as announce the formal decisions and, thus, cognitive process by which they themselves were made.

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Whereas earlier in his career Harnett had largely, but by no means exclusively, focused on either tabletop still lifes or vertical paintings, towards (what would be) the end of his life, he adamantly pursued both formats simultaneously. He produced works like *Old Models* and *The

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\(^{344}\) As discussed in Chapter 3, Milam (“The Artist’s Working Methods,” in *William M. Harnett*) worked with conservators to investigate Harnett’s use of under-drawing in eight paintings that span a good range of the artist’s career. She ultimately concluded that he used minimal (if any) under-drawing in early paintings like *The Banker’s Table*, but increasingly came to alter and adjust his compositions by painting directly on the canvas later in his career. Dewey’s work on psychology reveals the significance of this strategy for the meaning of Harnett’s paintings; it meant that his compositions actually pictured his cognitive process as much as his manual technique enabled the paintings as objects to embody it (as argued in Chapter 3).
Old Cupboard Door in which the diverse objects previously discussed were seen against vertical cupboards, and others—like Ease and Music—in which they rested on tables in paintings that were oriented horizontally. But despite their distinct formats, these sets of paintings exhibit a shared (and, for Harnett, new) interest in explicitly interior spaces. While the weathered wooden planks in the single object paintings could have been part of an inner or outer wall or door, the late works clearly picture the kind of furniture—namely, cupboards, desks, and curtains—commonly seen in Victorian homes. In Old Models, the cupboard is slightly recessed from the wall and offset by a shelf, and in The Old Cupboard Door the eponymous subject is framed within a decorative border and inset into a wall with wooden wainscoting. In Still Life—Violin and Music, 1888 (fig. 97), the yellow cupboard is more rustic than the greenish-grey ones in the previous two paintings and its edges are perfectly aligned with those of the canvas; yet, as in those works, the canvas assumes the force of a piece of furniture that has been littered with objects. Similarly, the tabletop works also “zoom out” to place the kinds of tables that appeared in Harnett’s earliest paintings into context. In Ease, for example, the books, scores, and objects d’art are piled upon a large table sited in the middle of the canvas; the table holds back a velvety green curtain, and one would be able to see underneath the table were it not for the lush rug cloaked over it. Comparable things appear in Music, where the rug is only partially draped over a desk, revealing its marble surface and carved base, and the curtain is a deep, dark shade of (what looks to be) brown. Likewise, in Still Life, the objects sit upon a carved wooden desk that is covered, in part, by a rather stale green cloth and pushed against a fireplace or cupboard. These articles of furniture, like the cupboards, frame the canvases themselves as places or as things (respectively) that have been filled with objects.

In the 1880s, when many of these works were made, the kind of eclectic accumulation of objects that they pictured was a common sight in homes and other places where people convened, if not in paintings. Similar books and instruments might be held and used in parlors across the country, where families and guests would gather to read, perform, and discuss things like Shakespeare, Italian opera, the Bible, and the other kinds of compositions depicted in Harnett’s late work. They were also staples of the late-nineteenth-century artist’s studio, whose description in both reviews as well as paintings can provide first-hand insight into the significance of such spaces in the home and, more pressingly for our purposes, in Harnett’s work. The most prominent and extravagant example of a late-nineteenth-century artist’s studio was the space that William Merritt Chase maintained in the famed Tenth Street Studio Building from 1878 to 1896. At first, Chase moved into a small studio on the first floor of the building, but within the year he was able to acquire the nearby gallery previously occupied by landscape painter Albert Bierstadt, which even earlier had been the place where tenants of the building showed their work. By 1879, Chase had filled the space with all manner of objects that many a reviewer listed in awed detail (fig. 98-99). It contained everything from Japanese umbrellas to a Venetian tapestry, a Turkish coffee pot to a Persian incense-lamp as well as paintings by contemporary artists and Old Masters or, at the very least, their followers. Writing in “Studio-Life in New York” for The Art Journal in that year, John Moran included an inventory of the

346 For more on the decoration and uses of the parlor in nineteenth-century America, see: Katherine C. Grier, Culture & Comfort: Parlor Making and Middle-Class Identity, 1850-1930 (Washington, D.C. and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1988) and Louise L. Stevenson, The Victorian Homefront: American Thought and Culture, 1860-1880 (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1991), particularly, “Serious Reading and Reading Seriously.” Grier argues that the late-nineteenth-century American parlor was the center of the home; it was both the family’s public face and its private refuge. As will be discussed, William Merritt Chase used his studio in the same way; it was a quasi-public, quasi-private space filled with similar objects. Harnett depicted similar objects, assemblages, and spaces in his late paintings such that they might also serve this purpose.

studio’s contents over a (very tight) page long. Yet rarely do these objects appear in works by Chase other than those that are of his studio and even less frequently, if at all, are they the focus of those pictures. His collection, as Moran implies, was intended to decorate the studio itself.

Chase used the studio in several different ways. He worked in the inner, smaller (original) room and entertained in the gallery that he had “inherited” from Albert Bierstadt. Further, he entertained various types of audiences. As art historian Annette Blaugrund notes in her study of the famed Tenth Street Studio Building, Chase

…used his studio for a variety of activities in addition to teaching. He held weekly Saturday receptions in the large studio. In this grand temple of art, he conducted classes, held exhibitions and meetings, hosted dinners, balls, and costume parties, and above all engineered sales. His collaboration with other artists in the Tile Club and the Society of American Artists [two organizations that met in the studio] was both beneficent and self-serving.

The space was thus host to students and colleagues as well as clients. It was a place where people met to talk and learn about art as well as buy it, though that last function has been a particular focus of the literature on Chase’s studio. Scholars like Blaugrund and Nicolai Cikovsky, Jr. have hailed it as the artist’s greatest legacy and, along with Sarah Burns, as “the ultimate marketing tool.” The eclectic and exotic objects, which were extensively covered in the press, were understood as a way to draw people to the studio, where they would then see, and could buy, Chase’s work. But, by all accounts, the studio also attracted students and colleagues, who flocked to (and embraced) it as an aesthetic space apart from the commercial demands of the

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349 Blaugrund, 105.
350 Blaugrund, 122.
outside world. They talk of its “atmosphere”—a term that Cikovsky picks up and defines in terms of the inspiration that the space offered. The studio, then, was an inherently social space to which visitors were drawn—albeit for diametrically opposed reasons—by the profusion of intriguing objects that filled it, not to mention the other visitors and events that those objects drew.

These visitors (or their stand-ins) are pictured in the handful of paintings that Chase made of his Manhattan studio. Of the eight paintings, three are known to depict the inner room (the space in which Chase actually worked) and the others picture the outer gallery, where he greeted and interacted with guests. The objects enumerated by writers like John Moran grace or, more accurately, litter the studio; they are haphazardly piled upon shelves, hung along every inch of a wall, clustered on desks and tables, and even scattered on the floor. The paintings have been discussed as marketing tools, just like the studio that they depict—as works that picture the objects that visitors to the studio would have just seen and, so, as souvenirs. But the paintings did not simply illustrate the studio, as did contemporaneous photographs of it; they depicted the objects and the space in use—a fact that has significant implications for Harnett’s paintings, where similar things have been arranged by the artist and are displayed for the viewer. In all of Chase’s studio paintings except for the first one, the artist himself, his wife, and/or at least one model is present. In Interior of a Studio (fig. 100), Chase lounges beside, and chats with, a woman, who holds what appears to be a print in her hand. The lady in Studio Interior (fig. 101) sits on a bench and flips through an oversized book of prints whose size and heft demand that it lay at her feet, while the woman in In the Studio looks up from the prints in her lap and those

352 Cikovsky, 7-8.
gathered on the floor beside her. Chase paints at his easel in *Interior*. Both of the *Tenth Street Studio* (fig. 102) paintings picture multiple people: in the first, a young lady sits at a table, reading or looking at the objects in front of her, as a man and two women stand shoulder to shoulder looking at a painting on the wall. In the second, a man and woman sit and converse at another table in a different corner of the space. The people in Chase’s studio paintings, then, hold, look at, read, and talk about objects, specifically books, paintings, and prints. The object-filled studio served as a space where people contemplated works of art and communed with one another, often over these objects.

Chase’s studio was decorated and touted as a place filled with exotic wonders that served as the backdrop for countless events and meetings. But his paintings of it reveal the kind of thoughtful and intellectual exchanges that took place there—be they between people or via objects. Works like *Tenth Street Studio* pictured prints, books, and paintings as things to be contemplated and discussed, and the studio, as a semi-public site where such activities occurred. The cupboards and intimate spaces in Harnett’s late paintings could almost be details of such paintings. They picture the kinds of furniture seen in Chase’s studio interiors as well as the seemingly chaotic mess of objects piled upon or against it. This is not to claim that Harnett’s late paintings are of his own studio, but to suggest that the way he deploys furniture within them positions his paintings to function like that kind of space—like a place in which works of art, broadly conceived, are encountered. In paintings like *The Old Cupboard Door* and *Old Models*, Harnett paints the canvas to look like the kinds of cupboards one might see in the home, parlor, and studio, and in works like *Ease*, he renders it as just such a space so that the works not only contain and juxtapose objects, but, like Chase’s paintings and the studio on which they were based, present them as things in circulation, if not quite use. Chase pictured people clutching or
flipping through the prints that he kept in his studio, but Harnett depicts his musical scores, books, and decorative bric-a-brac as though they have been temporarily and hastily set down on a table or cupboard. The gun, horseshoe, and pipe in his single-object paintings were paired with a newspaper clipping that suggested that those objects were obsolete and on display to be seen. In his late work, though, despite the very real differences between the vertical and horizontal paintings, which certainly warrant exploration, Harnett depicts the objects and, more specifically, assemblages of objects piled upon furniture such that the paintings become the kind of site, like a parlor or studio, in which ideas are exchanged between people by engaging with things. He eliminates the people (namely, the artist and visitors) seen in Chase’s studio paintings such that the works themselves stand forth as the physical site that has been arranged by Harnett to be encountered by a viewer. As such, the works functioned like the musical and literary compositions pictured within them: as material, if transitory means by which ideas were transmitted from an “author” to a “reader.”

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Be they of extensive landscapes or protracted conversations, mid-century paintings often depicted extant or a priori narratives. Works by Frederic Church and William Sydney Mount pictured Alexander von Humboldt’s conception of nature or social stereotypes, respectively. By contrast, in his late work, Harnett established formal relationships between his chosen models in the process of devising (one might say designing) his canvases such that the paintings actually represent this operation. They picture his mind at work as the paintings were being created—much as the books and scores that they depict were understood to witness and transmit the ideas,
if not also record the creative processes, as Noah Porter suggested in *Books and Reading*, of those who composed them. Rendered by Harnett as a quasi-public, quasi-private place, the canvas thus resonated with other such spaces filled with objects—like the page, the artist’s studio, and the mind—that served as physical yet transitional conduits between self and other. In his early tabletop still lifes and game paintings as well as the single-object works, Harnett strove to find ways to mobilize the materiality of both paint and canvas in order to make knowledge visible and legible. He introduced subjects and techniques that framed the painting as a mode of communication. The late paintings take this interest a step further and exhibit a decisive concern with what they, as things that are composed, would or could offer to the viewer. More so than at any other point in his career, Harnett pursued two different pictorial formats (the vertical cupboards and horizontal rooms) simultaneously as well as equally. These sets of paintings picture the same objects, but do so in contexts that engage the viewer in radically different ways. Although I do not pursue that issue here, its very presence suggests that Harnett had become concerned with how his work would be encountered as well as why it should be. By diverging from the more formulaic compositional strategies that he had employed earlier in his career—from the collage-like approach that he used in his early tabletop paintings and the didactic displays that characterized his single-object works—Harnett explored the impact of his “curatorial” decisions on the viewers that bore witness to them. In arranging and re-arranging his models around the canvas, he approached painting as people like John F. Genung, John S. Hart, and R. G. Parker suggested that writers compose their work in order to make their thoughts and ideas legible and thus comprehensible. As he depicted ostensibly random assemblages of objects, then, Harnett’s paintings came to represent how his eye and mind, working in concert, drew connections between them and also communicated that work to the viewer such that both the
practices of making and viewing the painting became epistemological exercises. It was an intellectual experience as much as a visual encounter; in fact, the paintings demonstrated the extent to which these processes were aligned, again, for both artist and viewer alike. The paintings thus assumed the function of the scores and novels pictured within them; they employed composition in order to give material and thus visible form to the cognitive process.

Once composed, these late paintings would then be hung in the homes and offices of the wealthy collectors and industrialists who had purchased and/or commissioned them. They would be among the things—the furniture, bric-a-brac, and other works of art—that people like Thomas B. Clarke and William B. Bement had arranged and re-arranged within their parlors or offices. As forthright compositions encountered in such contexts, they would have functioned like the novels and plays performed or at least recited in other semi-private/semi-public places as well as depicted within Harnett’s paintings. Meaning, the paintings were also things to be encountered, experienced, and internalized. If, like ethnographic displays, the single-object works appealed to the eye and made knowledge visible, these late paintings spoke to the mind and made its operations legible and, thus, comprehensible. The comparatively chaotic assemblages of objects in works like *The Old Cupboard Door* and *Ease* (over paintings like *The Faithful Colt*) actually exhibit an attempt to impose order upon the visible, material world that Dewey’s work suggests had distinctly intellectual implications for the agent behind them. But these compositions also make that very process visible and material on canvas such that the viewer encountered them as the artist did his models or like a reader would the excerpts of seminal texts in an elocution manual: as elements to be reconciled within and through the self through the cognitive act of seeing. Thereby, the paintings or, more specifically, the compositions within them were experienced as one’s own. They pictured the mind and its operations back to the viewer such that
in viewing or reading the painting, he, in effect, witnessed his own mind at work. They did not illustrate an inherited narrative, but stimulate and occasion the cognitive process. As Harnett came to compose his paintings according to similar principles as those used by writers, (arguably) the mind, and “designers” to find logic among often unrelated objects in (and even through) space, his work also became a means of interface between, but also for, artist and viewer alike.

CODA

As discussed earlier, lithographer (and founder of the Cincinnati Grand Orchestral Company) Frank Tuchfarber bought The Old Violin from the Cincinnati Industrial Exposition in 1886. Shortly thereafter, he produced two commercial prints from the painting: one printed on glass and the other on paper. The prints were fairly accurate representations of the original painting: a violin occupies the center of the composition, where it hangs against a score and beside a bow. A small newspaper clipping is affixed directly onto the wood planks that constitute the background of the image, and a small blue envelope is tucked into the lower of the two hinges that traverse the planks. But Harnett had no hand in producing them; in fact, it is rumored that he took legal action against the Commissioners of the Exposition, who had sold Tuchfarber the print. A clipping in the Blemly scrapbook from an article in the Philadelphia Item published three years after the artist died says that he “brought suit against the Commissioners before the Common Pleas Court of Hamilton County, Ohio,” a fact that Alfred Frankenstein was not able to corroborate in his thorough-going research. In turn, an outfit called the Donaldson Art Sign

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354 Frankenstein, 76.
355 Frankenstein, 73-78.
Company “appropriated” the Tuchfarber prints to make its own poster—a practice in which the Company appears to have readily engaged and for which it was in fact sued in an unrelated incident almost twenty years later. In a case that was appealed to the Supreme Court, George Bleistein, et al. of the Courier Lithographing Company charged the Donaldson Art Sign Company with copyright infringement for reproducing three advertisements of a circus that Courier had created for a client.\(^{356}\) Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. drafted the majority opinion, in which he asserted that commercial advertisements are protected by copyright and constitute original designs, like the maps, charts, chromolithographs (generally-speaking) and other multipliable images explicitly cited within the Copyright Act of 1870.\(^{357}\); for, as Holmes wrote, “others are free to copy the original. They are not free to copy the copy.”\(^{358}\) That is to say, one could not lay claim to a certain subject—it was open to all—but the way in which that subject was represented could not be reproduced by anyone else. He explained that “in their ensemble and in all their details, in their design and particular combinations of figures, lines, and colors, [the ads] are the original work of the plaintiff’s designer.”\(^{359}\) With that statement, Holmes essentially claimed that a work of art was defined by its formal properties in general and, amongst other factors, its composition in particular. It was not synonymous with its subject matter, but with how that subject matter was depicted—the choices and decisions that the artist had made. Copies like those produced by Frank Tuchfarber and the Donaldson Art Company replicated the appearance of *The Old Violin*, while counterfeiters like those prosecuted

\(^{356}\) I am grateful to Julie Melby, Graphic Arts Librarian at Princeton University, for bringing this case to my attention. Her introduction to the print, a paper version of which is located in the Graphic Arts Division of Firestone Library, can be found at http://blogs.princeton.edu/graphicarts/.

\(^{357}\) Copyright Act, Washington D.C. (1870), Primary Sources on Copyright (1450-1900), eds L. Bently & M. Kretschmer, www.copyrighthistory.org. [Website administered by the Faculty of Law, University of Cambridge]

\(^{358}\) Bleistein v. Donaldson Lithographing Co., Washington D.C. (1903), Primary Sources on Copyright (1450-1900), eds L. Bently & M. Kretschmer, www.copyrighthistory.org. [Website administered by the Faculty of Law, University of Cambridge]

\(^{359}\) Ibid.
by Detective Drummond imitated the means by which money was produced. But works like the advertisement made by Bleistein and Harnett’s painting were protected under law as original ventures by virtue of the fact that their formal properties provided a unique perspective on their chosen subjects. In paintings like The Old Violin, Harnett took this definition of art quite literally (or he rendered it such). His technique and approach to the canvas as well as composition inscribed his perspective into the material form of the painting itself. Thus, the more that his “copies” approached the models on which they were based, the more authentic his paintings became; for the “original” that these strategies reproduced and that the works, by extension, embodied was none other than the artist himself. The paintings were not simply depictions of their inanimate subject matter nor exemplars of a distinct style, but a product and, most insistently and importantly, a picture of the way that Harnett negotiated between his models and the paint on canvas in which they were depicted.
The work of understanding what William Harnett’s paintings mean and the interests that may have driven them often takes us away from the paintings themselves and towards the many other disciplines and fields with which they intersected. It requires research into how people in late-nineteenth-century America, Harnett and his viewers amongst them, would have understood things like drawing, painting, objects, and composition—things that may be associated with the arts, but actually factored into many other disciplines at the time, too. From the humanities to the sciences to the social sciences, these practices (object-making among them) were used and discussed in ways that illuminate how Harnett’s approach to them was, in fact, a discipline or practice unto itself—a pursuit of knowledge or a certain goal. Much has been written about the social function that Harnett’s paintings might have served in a rapidly industrializing society, but his interest in making them (even as social tools) has been isolated from the conversation. In the absence of journals, letters, or any written material by the artist, scholars bracketed his precise investment in that project or in his work in general. This dissertation has taken Harnett’s oeuvre and the shifts that it witnessed as a statement of his intentions and used period texts and images to explain their meaning and significance within the terms provided by American culture in the late-nineteenth-century—terms that Harnett himself took up and explored. As such, his work emerges as a project to reevaluate painting—its procedures and goals—in a moment when institutions dedicated to the visual arts (like the academy and the museum), their missions, and practices were themselves a subject of inquiry. The strategies that Harnett adopted and developed to probe this unwieldy topic came from his academic training and professional experiences, but they resonate with practices in fields like rhetoric and anthropology that reveal their precise function in his paintings.
These dual contexts—the expressly artistic and the broadly cultural—account for the two objectives that these strategies and, by extension, Harnett can be seen to pursue. On the one hand, the artist’s paintings progressively employ and exhibit verbal-like tactics and, so, aesthetics. Over the course of his career, Harnett manipulated paint, the canvas, and his subjects such that his works became surfaces marked by forms whose meanings came from the ways that they were composed. His earliest tabletop works pictured objects that could be read whereas, by the end of his life, the paintings themselves were legible in the manner of texts. The subjects that Harnett chose (both still life in general and inanimate objects in particular) as well as the ways that he exploited the canvas as a plane and, later, as an object itself challenged what he would have perceived as the illustrational bent of mid-century painting. Practices like writing and photography modeled how the material qualities of a painting—the mark and the support, respectively—could be embraced and deployed to position the medium as a mode of communication in addition to (and concomitant with) representation. At the same time, his paintings grappled with the content that they could (and could not) communicate. They strove to record and depict thought—the mind at work—in ways that paralleled the understanding of writing, books, and authorship as well as objects and even interior space at the time. These various media and the disciplines in which they participated exhibited a pervasive interest in how to describe knowledge—how it formed and circulated and could itself be known, which was shared by Harnett’s paintings and, more specifically, the technical and formal techniques that he employed in addition to the objects that they were used to render. It is, of course, impossible to know whether Harnett was motivated by a desire to represent the mind and its operations or a desire to expand (and complicate) the formal possibilities and communicative potential of painting, but his work and its corollaries suggest that these two gestures went hand in hand. As
Harnett adopted the strategies by which his subjects were made, his paintings and, more specifically, their material properties were increasingly inscribed with (as well as announced) the manual and thereby cognitive processes that attended the creation of them.

Whether Harnett was driven by an interest in painting or cognition, throughout his career his paintings absorbed and adopted the formal qualities and thus functions of the subjects that he depicted. Whether practices (like reading, writing, and hunting), man-made things, or compositions, as Harnett pictured them, he also (in a manner akin to drawing) deconstructed how they were made only to—or even as he would—reconstruct them in paint. The paintings, thus, consistently and insistently assumed these forms; they became text- and object-like and, more so, in ways that mutually reinforced one another. Harnett came to produce the works via linguistic methods that harnessed both the brute matter and physical application of the paint such that, in locating and rendering objects within and upon it, the canvas and its composition became a material agent in addition to a visual representation. As such, Harnett inscribed both the physical painting as well as the extended process by which it was made with meaning that derived from his contact with and manipulation of the paint used to make it. His work’s meaning did not inhere in the associations with or understanding of its subject matter, which is what the academy preached, but in how—both physically and thus visually—that subject was portrayed. Harnett used painting as an opportunity to investigate different kinds of objects and the way that they were made or constructed. Ironically, then, his attention to subject matter pushed painting beyond it. It enabled him to explore and exploit those aspects of objects and texts, which enabled them to convey ideas and serve as mediums, and invest painting with these functions. Thus, as much as the cultural artifacts, broadly conceived, pictured within them, his paintings also insist on foregrounding how they themselves were made—the materials used, how they were worked,
and the physical as well as mental effort that work entailed. For Harnett, the kind of transparency that this approach engendered may have had social benefits (consistent with Michael Leja and David Lubin’s interpretations of the function of the artist’s work in a burgeoning consumer society) or even political imperatives (like the ability to unite a diverse public in the realities of the present if not the memory of the past, as Cécile Whiting suggests). Within the interests and concerns of his day, though, how things were made—be they texts, objects or, as Harnett’s work suggests, images—had everything to do with who made and used them and, so, with humanity itself. The process of making something was a manual and yet intellectual enterprise in which the self was materialized, if not visualized—as in the still lifes in which William Harnett addressed this very practice.
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