Family Activity: Tricking the Eye
Provided by the Art Institute of Chicago Department of Museum Education

William Harnett excelled at trompe l’œil (tromp’ low-ee), or "tricking the eye" in his many still life paintings. In *For Sunday’s Dinner*, a freshly killed rooster appears to hang on a door from a string. Its feathers have been plucked, showing its yellow, pimpled skin. A metal fixture on the door seems to have slipped from its place over a keyhole, revealing the bare, scarred wood beneath.

The unknown artist who made *Rack Picture for Dr. Nones* portrays an old-fashioned bulletin board that held important documents under strips of ribbon. "Rack-picture" still lifes like this one functioned as biographical portraits. The artist has included objects related to Dr. Nones' life and career as a dentist. By creating such highly detailed and realistic images, Harnett and other American painters from the 19th century sought recognition for their skills at illusion.

Discussion Questions

• What other details did Harnett include in his painting?
• Where is the light coming from? How can you tell?
• Can you find the artist's signature in *For Sunday’s Dinner*, painted to look as if it has been scratched into the door?
• What kinds of documents appear in *Rack Picture for Dr. Nones*? What do they tell you about his life?

Activity

Make a trompe l'œil painting.

Materials Needed:

• Bulletin board or other soft surface, such as cardboard
• Tacks and/or ribbon
• Flat objects collected from home to place on the board
• Paper
• Pencil
• Markers or Crayons
Steps:

1. Use tacks or ribbons to place on your board things that reflect your likes, experiences, or personality, such as a favorite cartoon, a ticket to a theme park, stamps you collect, a ribbon from an award, or a picture of your favorite animal.

2. Make a light pencil sketch of what you see. Remember to include shadows and to show the different textures of the objects. Don't forget to include the flaws you see, including chips, tears, and dents. To make your drawing believable, be sure to make it life size.

3. Study the colors. Are they dark or light? Bright or pale? Choose colors that are nearest to what you see and add them to your image in watercolor.

4. When you are finished, post your drawing like a bulletin board on your wall and see how many people you can fool!

Glossary

portrait (n)
a pictorial representation (such as a painting) of a person, usually showing the face

still life (n)
the depiction of a group of inanimate objects, such as flowers or fruit, usually arranged by an artist