

JOHN MITCHELL

FINE PAINTINGS

EST 1931

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SAMUEL LEWIS (1753/4-1822)

A Deception

watercolour, pen and ink on paper, 14¼ x 19½ in.,

signed twice and dated 1787

Exhibited:

London, Society of Artists, 1791, no. 127 or 128



Fig 1. Samuel Lewis, *A Deception*; with John Mitchell Fine Paintings, 2005; now National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, accession no. 2008.28.1

In 2005, James Mitchell (of John Mitchell Fine Paintings) discovered in England an unusual *trompe l'oeil* card rack picture (Fig. 1). There was no attribution but judging from the text of the papers depicted and the various dates within the picture it was estimated to have been painted in the 1780s. With the assistance of Professor William H. Gerdts, the foremost authority on American still life painting, it transpired that the *trompe l'oeil* was by **Samuel Lewis (1753-1822)** a cartographer, drawing master and active member of the Philadelphia art world in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Gerdts had some years earlier re-attributed the earliest known American card rack painting to Lewis (Fig. 2) which for nearly two centuries had been assumed to be the work of Raphaëlle Peale (1774-1825). Until our picture was discovered, it was not known that Lewis had in fact been born and worked in London until he emigrated to Philadelphia in 1794.

By discovering this London-period *Deception* (as works of illusion were called in Georgian England) the missing link was made between the rack paintings of European artists such as Cornelius Gysbrechts (1625-1675) (**Fig. 3**) and Evert Collier (1642-1708) and the beginnings of the *trompe l'oeil* tradition in American art that flourished in the nineteenth century. Indeed, Evert Collier, who worked in Restoration London, can be considered as the main inspiration for Samuel Lewis' 'letter rack' pictures.

Fig. 2 Samuel Lewis, *A Deception*, Philadelphia Museum of Art
(formerly attributed to Raphael Peale)



That *Deception* was bought by an American collector and is now in the collection of the National Gallery of Art, Washington DC. For such a fascinating and rare artist, it was hoped that there were yet other pictures to be discovered. Now, happily, twenty years on, a third *Deception* by Lewis has emerged. Immediately comparable in style and size to the Washington example, it follows the same criss-cross pattern of ribbons across a board, with cards tucked behind them and overlapping one another. As in the two others the artist has subtly included his signature on the right side of the painting, disguised as a receipt for his wife or mother (reads *Mrs Lewis*). A seemingly random variety of papers cover the picture, including coach, lottery and theatre tickets, playing cards, sheet music, advertisements, a copy of *The Public Ledger* and the 1760 edition of *Rider's British Merlin*. The deliberate inclusion of words such as 'imitations' and 'verities' on some of the papers emphasize the picture's device as a visual deception. Lewis displays his masterful ability to mimic different type faces and calligraphic styles, while furthering the illusion by contrasting them with his own handwriting done in gall ink that has bled into the paper.

Reviewing Lewis' exhibition history at the Society of Artists in London, two paintings titled *A Deception* were displayed in 1791, and it is tempting to surmise that these refer to our current work and the Washington *Deception*. They may have even been conceived as a pair. The latest dating in this picture (1787) is visible in the top left, on the reverse side of *The Public Ledger*, so it is plausible that it was exhibited in 1791. Both *Deceptions* that we have found came from English collections and match in composition, one with red ribbons the other white, one signed Mr Lewis the other Mrs Lewis. For a man fond of puzzles and illusions it does not seem too far-fetched to see the play here. Following this line of thought further, if the coach ticket locations from both pictures are plotted on a map (Isleworth, Hammersmith, Paddington, Islington, Kingsland) we are presented with an exact line west to east across London, a coincidence or perhaps another game by a man whose primary profession was as a mapmaker.

Aside from the surface visual illusion and wordplay, is there a deeper puzzle to be solved? In 2007 the historian Julie Flavell published an article entitled *A Trick on the Eye* for the *BBC History* magazine, and revealed that the Washington *Deception* did indeed have a deeper narrative. She discovered that Lewis' brother William had been on trial for bank fraud, and was found guilty and hanged at Tyburn on 30th November 1774.

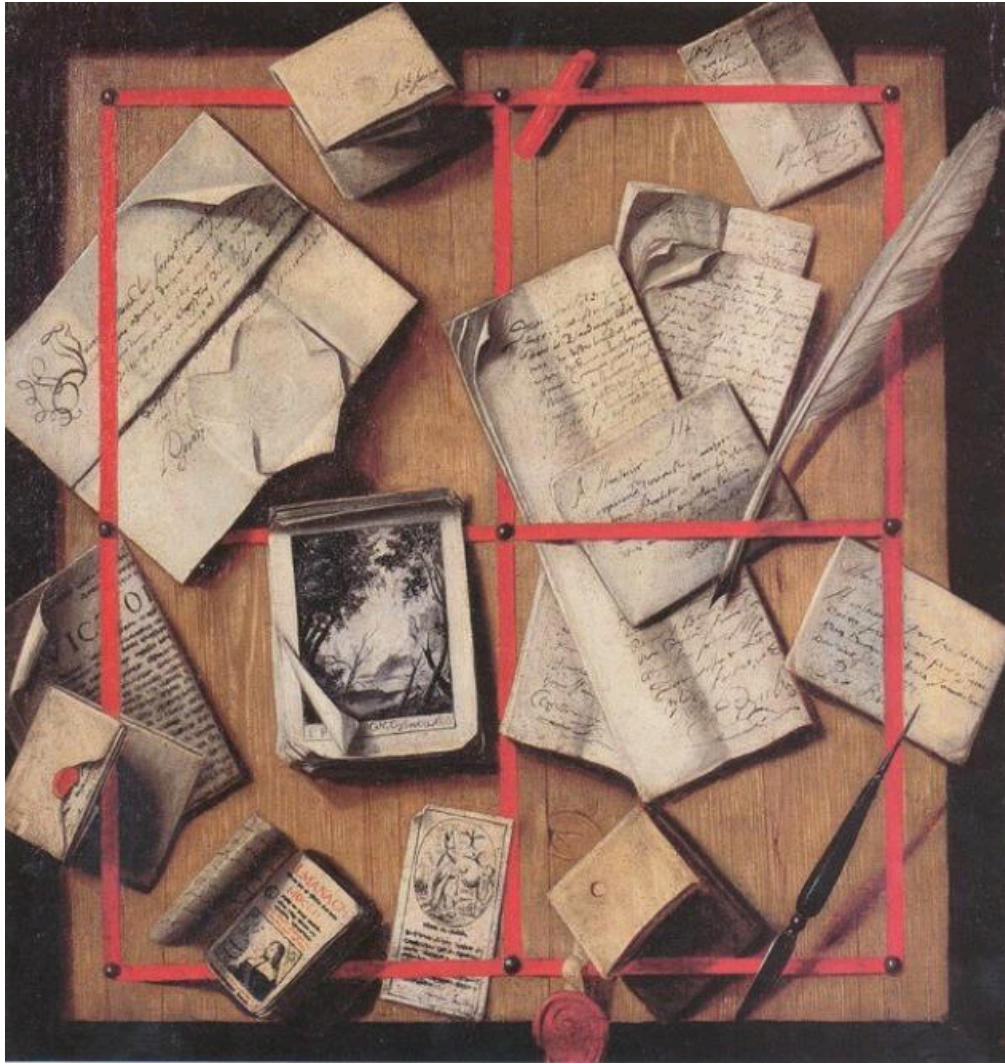


Fig 3. *Trompe l'oeil letter rack*, 1665, Cornelius Gysbrechts, Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris

All the names mentioned in the picture were involved in the defence at the trial, and the use of playing cards and a promissory note in the picture suggested that gambling debts may have driven William Lewis to so reckless a crime. A Mr. Jacob Roberts of 55 Chandos Street, Covent Garden is a recurring character referred to in both Washington's and our current *Deception*. Roberts was the Lewis family's landlord and acted as a character witness for William at his trial. Indeed, 55 Chandos Street is registered as Samuel Lewis's address in the exhibition records from 1791, seventeen years after the trial, so we can assume that Jacob Roberts was a longstanding acquaintance of the Lewis family. The reference to his name is on a theatre ticket in the top right corner of the painting shown as 'For the Benefit of Mr Roberts'.

If the hidden narrative of the Washington picture explores the sad tale of William Lewis's death, then this pendant perhaps alludes to a happier tale. The sheet music in the lower right for the *Married Man*, the adverts for perfume and the conspicuous use of the words 'wine' and 'parties' suggest a more celebratory narrative. In this context the playing cards and lottery tickets presumably suggest that fortune turned for the better.

In 1794 Lewis left London for Philadelphia to pursue a successful career as a mapmaker and painter of Deceptions, as contemporary exhibition catalogues testify, although only one *Deception* from this American period is known today (Fig. 2). Lewis's most famous work was the map of Lewis and Clark's track (1814), a reworking of the original maps drawn by Meriwether Lewis and William Clark on the first ever official expedition to the Pacific Coast (1804-06) (Fig. 4). He was an active member of the Philadelphia art world, exhibiting at the short-lived Columbianum Association in 1795 where he was also its secretary, and later exhibited at The Society of Artists of the United States held at the Pennsylvania Academy of the United States. At the time of his death in 1822 he was married with children and grandchildren.

Fig 4. Samuel Lewis, *Lewis and Clark's track across the western portion of North America*

Library of Congress, Washington DC



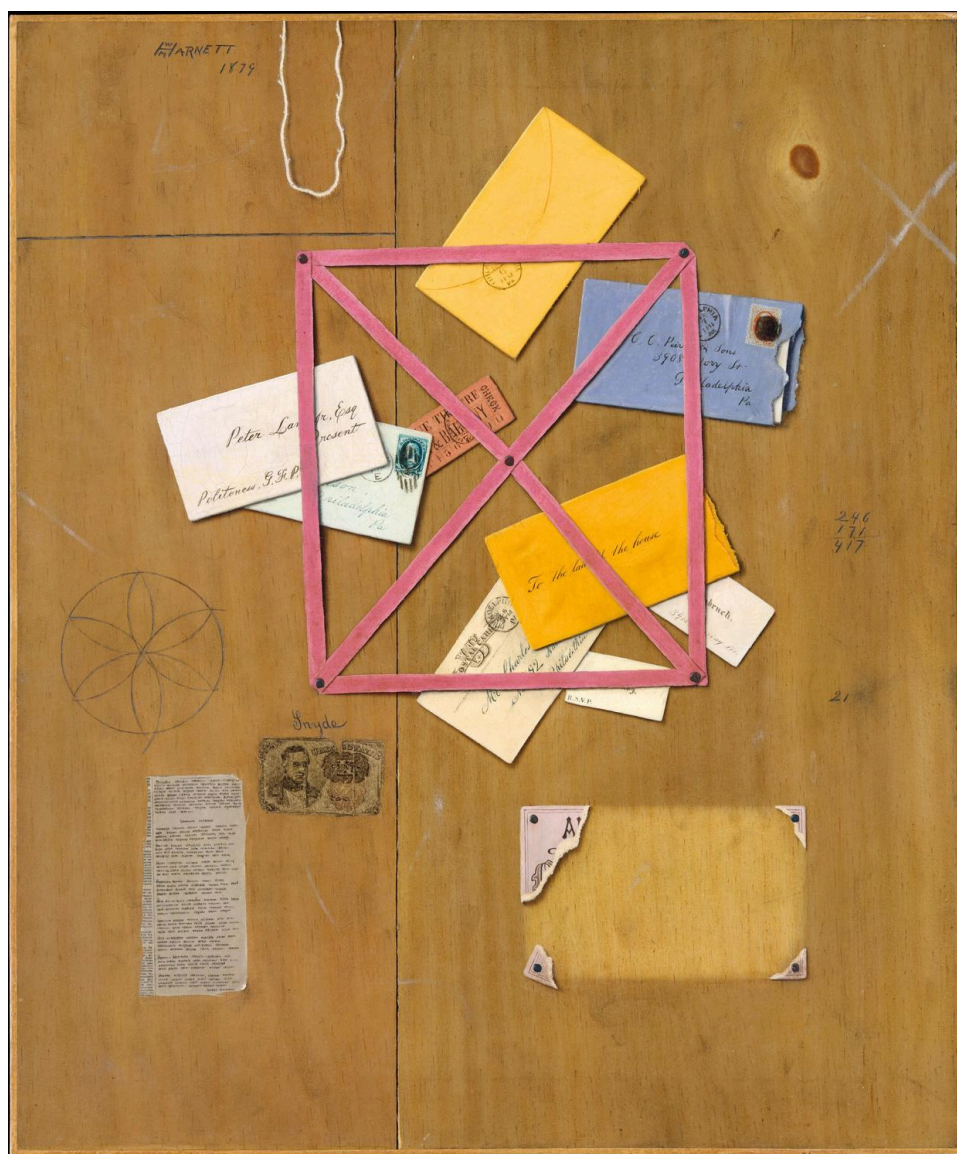


Fig 5, *The Artist's Letter Rack*, 1879, William Michael Harnett

Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

The convention of the card rack painting in Philadelphia flourished through the Peale dynasty of artists and reached its climax in the work of William Michael Harnett (Fig. 5) and John Frederick Peto in the 1880s. Having established that it was in fact Samuel Lewis who introduced this specific genre of painting into American art, it makes this exciting discovery of a third *Deception* by such an early and influential artist all the more important. As the late William Gerdtz summarised, **'Samuel Lewis must be recognised, then, as a significant figure in the Philadelphia art world of his time, and an artist who pioneered in the field of American trompe l'oeil painting'**.

Bibliography:

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Key:



1. *The Public Ledger*, Thursday July 6th 1775. A long-running British newspaper (1760-2017) that was neutral in political opinion; funded through advertising rather than political party subsidies as was common at the time, hence the part-visible mantra “Open to All Parties, but Influenced by None”. The date here is of significance as the day that Congress issued a “Declaration on the Causes and Necessity of Taking Up Arms” against British authority in the American colonies. The subsequent resistance by King George III and Parliament to this declaration lead to the enlargement of the British army and Royal Navy, and pushed Congress to move to a declaration of independence the following year.

2. A stub for the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden. The Mr Dunstall referenced refers to the actor John Dunstall (1717-1778) who appears in many paintings and prints of the age, most famously in Zoffany's conversation piece *Love in a Village* painted in 1767 (Yale Center for British Art, B1985.19.6).
2. *Rider's British Merlin*, 1760. An annual almanac containing useful information for the year, including monthly horticultural notes, saints' days, and the dates and locations for fairs. These fairs were important for buying and selling and to exhibit innovations in husbandry. The description obscured in the picture reads "Notes on Husbandry, Fairs, Marts, High Roads, and Tables for many necessary uses".
3. Gibson & Co. was a manufacturer of playing cards founded by Charles Gibson in 1770.
4. A ticket to the British Museum.
5. Three lottery tickets.
6. A theatre ticket for *The Heroine of the Cave* by Irish playwright and poet Paul Hiffernan (1719-1777). The play was first performed 19th March 1774, the date of ticket shown. The Mr Reddish mentioned was the actor and theatre manager Samuel Reddish (1735-1785), who died in a lunatic asylum at York.
7. Two coach tickets.
8. A theatre ticket to *The Inconstant*, a play by George Farquhar (1677-1707) first performed in 1702 that was revived several times in the 18th and 19th centuries. The Mr Roberts mentioned may refer to the Lewis family landlord at 55 Chandos Street.