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book review of

*Mr. Collier's Letter Racks: A Tale of Art and Illusion at the Threshold of the Modern Information Age* by Dror Wahrman

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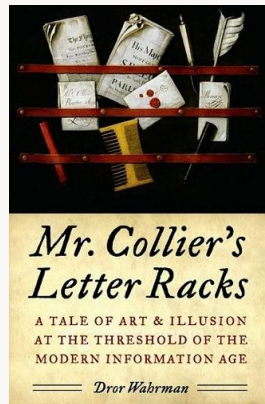
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Dror Wahrman,

*Mr. Collier's Letter Racks: A Tale of Art and Illusion at the Threshold of the Modern Information Age.*

Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012.

288 pp.; 75 color illustrations.

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The latest addition to the art historical literature about trompe l'oeil painting has much to offer scholars of nineteenth-century art. *Mr. Collier's Letter Racks: A Tale of Art and Illusion at the Threshold of the Modern Information Age* is by the distinguished social and political historian of eighteenth-century Britain, Dror Wahrman. Best known for his studies about the development of modern identity, class, and changing definitions of gender, Wahrman became fascinated by a trompe l'oeil still-life by Edward Collier (ca. 1642–1708), a Dutch artist who worked in Holland and London. His book describes a hunt for the artist and his work as passionate as that found in Alfred Frankenstein's classic *After the Hunt, William Harnett and Other American Still Life Painters, 1870–1900*, in which Frankenstein described Collier as “one of the most brilliantly inventive still life painters who ever lived” (82).<sup>[1]</sup> In fact, the nineteenth-century American trompe l'oeil artists are relevant to Wahrman's discussion in a variety of ways, and so it is not a surprise that the book ends with a discussion of American letter rack pictures and, in a splendid final flourish, Edgar Allan Poe's story, “The Purloined Letter” (227–30). Fortunately for both the author and the reader, Oxford University Press has created a beautiful book: many excellent color plates with spectacular details, particularly appreciated when so much of the argument depends upon close readings of the pictures, and a beautifully laid out text. Collier depicted certain elements repeatedly, and the book includes mesmerizing spreads of color illustrations comparing different versions of the same printed documents and objects. Following Wahrman's discussion is a pleasure.

Although the term “trompe l'oeil” did not appear in print until 1800, used by Louis-Léopold Boilly in the title of a painting shown at the Paris Salon that year, the pictorial type was defined by stories from classical authors and the earliest known examples are Roman copies after Greek works such as the mosaic of the unswept floor (2nd century BCE, Vatican Museum).<sup>[2]</sup>

Trompe l'oeil elements like cartellini or a housefly at rest regularly appeared in paintings beginning in the fifteenth century. Sometimes the trompe l'oeil offered a more fundamental challenge to the nature of the representation, as in the *Madonna and Child with Angels* (National Gallery of Scotland), painted about 1490 in Ferrara, where the divine figures appear as if revealed after paper or parchment has been torn away from the stretcher, the ragged edges of the curling paper (complete with a fly) framing the scene. The earliest letter rack picture, the type of trompe l'oeil for which Collier was best known, also comes from the 1490s, painted by Vittore Carpaccio (J. Paul Getty Museum). During the seventeenth century, trompe l'oeil still-lives showing nearly flat objects represented whole and at actual scale—thus presenting the least challenge to the illusion of three-dimensionality—became popular in northern Europe. One of the most memorable shows a nearly perfect subject for this type of illusion, a painting by the Dutch Cornelius Gijsbrechts of the back of a canvas, complete with wooden stretchers, nails, and a label (1670, Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen). Other types found in seventeenth-century Holland, especially letter rack and *quod libret* pictures, had great success in nineteenth-century America in paintings by William Harnett and John Peto among others.

Despite the modesty of most of these trompe l'oeil pictures, limited by definition in both subject and style, they have attracted a remarkable amount of scholarly attention in recent years. Richard Wollheim, Norman Bryson, and a variety of art historians including David Freedberg and Creighton Gilbert, have discussed them as exemplars of Western conceptions of pictorial mimesis.<sup>[3]</sup> The conundrum of trompe l'oeil still-lives, and what inspires such grand claims for them, is their combination of a painting style that is meant to be as invisible as possible with a detailed description of ordinary objects, typically things that present the least challenge to binocular vision. Thus, it has been argued, this type of painting exists outside conventional art historical narratives structured by place and/or person and period. As Arthur Danto explained:

The paintings finally convey a spirit of wonder, and of magic. The interior space they imply is the Wunderkammer, in which they belong. . . . There is such a space, even with the same letter rack, in Durer's depiction of Saint Jerome. It is the enclave of the sorcerer and the Faust. Trompe l'oeil belongs less to the history of painting than of arcane curiosity. The aura is not the aura of art but of something mysterious, occult, powerful and possibly forbidden.<sup>[4]</sup>

Or, as Jean Baudrillard put it, trompe l'oeil painting is not part of art or part of history. "It has become a metaphysical category—in the face of reality and against it—a more profound simulacrum than the real itself."<sup>[5]</sup> *Mr. Collier's Letter Racks* provides ample evidence for the counter argument.

As the title of the book indicates, Wahrman limited his study to Collier's paintings of letter racks, albeit placed within a very rich account of his life and career. Apparently Collier's first example of the type was a copy of one of Samuel van Hoogstraten's paintings that he had seen on his first trip to London during the early 1680s (106–7, 117–18). Relying mostly on records of private sales—relatively few of Collier's works are in public collections—Wahrman established an oeuvre of about 70 extant letter rack paintings out of what he estimates might have been a total in the low hundreds (33). This is an astonishing number, far exceeding the production of any other artist. Wahrman also distinguished Collier's work from that by other artists who made Collier-like letter rack paintings. But Wahrman's argument goes far beyond these

rewards of his extensive archival research. As he saw more of Collier's paintings, he saw "peculiar things. Disappearing letters, faux monograms, insinuated messages, impossible title pages, unstable spellings, stray fonts . . . Collier's oeuvre was like an intricate puzzle . . ." (7). He came to believe that:

What made Collier's work so rich was the fortuitous coincidence of the skill of the illusionist artist with this new media regime [in London about 1700] that to his trained eye was brimming with illusionist possibilities. . . . [T]he issues that preoccupied him with regard to the media revolutions of the turn of the eighteenth century are surprising prefigurations of concerns that accompany our own media revolution of the twenty-first (8).

At the heart of Wahrman's book is the question of meaning, and whether these apparently guileless depictions of printed matter, letters, and other incidental objects add up to a sum that is more than its modest parts. This is the aspect that is of most interest to scholars of nineteenth-century art.

Central to Wahrman's interpretation is his conviction that Collier's choice of which texts to paint reveals much about the explosion of cheap, ephemeral publications in London during the mid-1690s (27–9). Unlike the so-called medley pictures of the period, which show the range of contemporary printed material, including plays, sermons, satires, and songs, as well as music sheets, trade cards, prints, and playing cards, Collier again and again selected almanacs, newspapers, and royal speeches. All informational serials dated to specific points in time, they are characteristic of a period when "the world of print had joined the world of conversation, gossip, and rumor in singular devotion to issues of the moment" (40–1). Furthermore, Collier's pictures offer "a visual *mélange* of perhaps as many as ten different typographical ways to place word on the printed page . . . Unlike the earlier letter rack artists [Wallerant] Vaillant and Gijbsbrechts, who had reveled in their ability to reproduce multiple handwritings, Collier reveled instead in his ability to capture the multifarious appearances of print" (63). Finally, the printed texts are shown as "curled, wrinkled, bent out of shape, dog-eared, evidently beginning to crumble. . . . Only just off the presses, they are already en route to wrapping fish in the market" (47). By selecting this sort of printed material, Collier altered the meaning of the texts from the "enduring heft of human history" suggested by the "heavy tomes" found in his earlier *vanitas* compositions to publications which remind of the "instant decay of themselves. The artist succumbed to the secular moment: still life could not be still" (47).

Collier's painted texts document another important development of the period, the standardization of spelling and the calendar. Beyond Collier himself only slowly settling on a single spelling of his name, something which caused Wahrman immense trouble in his research, the artist painted printed and written texts that reveal changing spellings for many words, including days of the week (67–8). Sometimes Collier juxtaposed old and new possibilities and sometimes he combined different usages to create something that did not appear in the actual printed texts (57–61). Two versions of a title page, for example, were merged to form one that never existed (16). Collier also played with dates, placing documents with Gregorian dates next to ones which used the Julian calendar, sometimes adding a weekday that fit neither (72–6). Here, as elsewhere, Wahrman makes a point of stating the methodological assumptions contained within his interpretations. "It is important to realize that these variations [in conventions of spelling and dates] between paintings and within

paintings cannot be the result of coincidence or carelessness. . . . [Then] they would have displayed a largely random pattern, not a consistent and persistent one” (60).

Careful examination of the pictures convinced Wahrman that Collier played other games with the viewer. Some were visual. For example, in one painting Collier allowed a painted seam in the painted wood to appear in a painted strap over it, thus emphasizing the pictorial illusion by suddenly breaking it. Careful technical examination of the painting showed that this was part of the original surface (111–12). Some works seem to use parts of painted texts to convey a private meaning. One particularly ambitious example is Wahrman's suggestion that at least some of the postmarks on letters shown in the racks seem to place the pictures in a series, numbering them “No,” the abbreviation for November as well as (then as now) the shortened form of “number”, and then a date. In this way, Collier “transformed those very details that were supposed to convey individuality on a particular canvas—a dated pamphlet, a specific newspaper issue, a postmarked letter, a comb—into the markers of the seriality of the whole group” (98–9). Most startling, Collier may have hidden his initials E.C., sometimes more than once, within his paintings. Wahrman himself acknowledges the tin-hat crazy sound of this as he begins to see the letters in more and more pictures, some of which are in Collier's style but actually had been painted by other, less well-known artists (chaps. 8–9, 131–66). Wahrman suggests that this last reflects an early modern idea of authorship as something fluid, shared, even collective (178).

Like Frankenstein's study of Harnett, Wahrman's book devotes considerable attention to the difficulties posed for art historians by the picture type. If the measure of success is how convincing an illusion of the physical world a picture is, then where is the artistry and, even more fundamentally, where is the artist? Wahrman's and Frankenstein's careful teasing out of recognizable artistic personalities is a convincing demonstration of the presence of both. And these authors also found meaning in the pictures, starting with the things shown and building them and the choices they represent into a view of the world from which they came. Obvious though this approach might seem today, Frankenstein had to do vigorous battle against prevailing art historical trends, notably formalism. In Wahrman's case, the richness of his interpretations relies upon his extraordinarily full knowledge of the period. About Collier's political leanings, for example, he concluded: “For a long time Collier's politics baffled me, until I realized my mistake. I was interpreting his politics as I would those of an Englishman, but the only way they could really make sense was to trace them back to his roots in the Netherlands” (184). And so he did, “reconstructing Collier's family history and background, . . . and consider[ing] how the experience of growing up in the Anglo-Scottish-Dutch community in Breda in the 1640s and 1650s might have shaped the political meanings of his work” (188).

Not only is the quality of Wahrman's research superb, but it is presented as a dramatic narrative of discovery, complete with false starts, serendipitous moments, and unexpected advances, as well as painstaking archival searches. This makes *Mr. Collier's Letter Racks* a sort of primer of historical method, with much to offer both the student and the scholar of art history. Collier is not a major painter and does not challenge any of the established historical narratives for the period. But the steps Wahrman took to construct a historical context for the pictures, a biography and oeuvre for the artist, and an argument for meaning are instructive. The clarity of his exposition and the impressive quality of the research offer a model and a

guide, while his conceptualization of the argument is of interest to all who study trompe l'oeil pictures. Last but surely not least, the pictures are a feast for the eyes.

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## Notes

- [1] Alfred Frankenstein, *After the Hunt. William Harnett and Other American Still Life Painters, 1870-1900*, rev. ed. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1969).
- [2] Boilly's trompe l'oeil paintings are discussed in Susan L. Siegfried, "Boilly and the Frame-up of 'Trompe l'oeil,'" *Oxford Art Journal* 15, No. 2 (1992): 27-37. For a history of the picture type, see Sybille Ebert-Schifferer, et al., *Deceptions and Illusions: Five Centuries of Trompe l'oeil Painting*, exh. cat. (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 2002).
- [3] For an extended exposition of his thinking about these pictures, see Richard Wollheim, "On Pictorial Representation," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 56, No. 3 (Summer 1998): 217-26. The issue also contains responses from various philosophers. See especially Susan L. Feagin, "Presentation and Representation," 234-40. Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked. Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990). David Freedberg, "Imitation and Its Discontents" in *Künstlerischer Austausch/Artistic Exchange. Akten des XXVIII Internationalen Kongresses für Kunstgeschichte. Berlin, 15. – 20. Juli 1992*, vol. 2 (Berlin: Akademie Verlag GmbH, 1993), 483- 91. Creighton Gilbert, "Grapes, Curtains, Human Beings: The Theory of Missed Mimesis" in *Künstlerischer Austausch/Artistic Exchange*, 413-9.
- [4] Arthur Danto, "Trompe l'oeil," *The Nation* 254, Issue 17 (May 4, 1992): 603.
- [5] Jean Baudrillard, "The Trompe-l'oeil" in Norman Bryson, ed. *Calligram. Essays in the New Art History from France* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1988), 59.