



Dutch or Flemish 17th Century

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Trompe l'Oeil of an Etching by Ferdinand Bol

c. 1675

oil on panel

overall: 37.5 × 31.4 cm (14 3/4 × 12 3/8 in.)

Inscription: upper right of the etching depicted in the painting: f. bol. f / 1642

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ENTRY

The fascination with illusionism goes back to antiquity, and artists throughout the centuries, particularly 17th-century Dutch and Flemish painters, delighted in creating works that could deceive a viewer into mistaking a painted image for reality itself. Illusionistic paintings are quite varied in character, but among the most successful types are images of relatively flat, inanimate objects, such as this extraordinary trompe l'oeil of an etching attached to a wooden plank with a red-wax seal.

The illusionism of *Trompe l'Oeil of an Etching by Ferdinand Bol* is compelling for a number of reasons. The delicacy of the artist's strokes, particularly the touches of the tiny brush that were used to replicate the etched lines of the print, have remained largely intact due to the painting's exceptional condition. The crinkles and creases in the paper are remarkably convincing, in part because of the subtle range of shadows they cause due to light falling across the irregular surface from the upper left. The success of the illusion also extends to the pine wood panel with its rough grain and knots, which were created with toned glazes, and to the seal, which has been built up with dense red pigments to approximate the proper texture of wax. The etching depicted here, *Old Man with a Flowing Beard and Velvet Beret* [fig. 1], is one of the earliest known prints of Ferdinand Bol (Dutch, 1616 - 1680) and is inscribed with his signature and date in the upper right of the etching: "f. bol. f / 1642." Bol executed the etching shortly after leaving the studio of Rembrandt van Rijn (Dutch, 1606 - 1669), whose influence is evident in Bol's choice

of an aged and rough-hewn model, as well as in the delicate etched strokes that animate the man's face and beard.

The attribution of the unsigned *Trompe l'Oeil of an Etching by Ferdinand Bol* has been a problem, but the history of such illusionistic images suggests that it was painted for a courtly patron, likely in the mid-1670s. An important prototype for this type of trompe l'oeil is *Trompe l'Oeil (Galatea)* [fig. 2] by the Alsatian still-life painter Sebastian Stoskopff (1597–1657). In that illusionistic image Stoskopff has depicted the engraving as though it were fixed to a dark-green board by 12 red-wax seals. Much as with the Gallery's trompe l'oeil, Stoskopff has enhanced the illusionism of his image by creating irregularities on the surface of the print, particularly at its corners where the paper appears to curl away from the board to which it seems to be attached. [1]

Stoskopff painted his work for his patron Count Johannes von Nassau-Idstein (1603–1677) in 1651, when the count enlisted the German painter and art theorist Joachim von Sandrart (1606–1688) to present Stoskopff's trompe l'oeil as a diplomatic gift to Holy Roman Emperor Ferdinand III in Vienna. Sandrart later recounted how the emperor had actually tried to remove the engraving from the board, but, when he discovered the deceit, laughed endlessly about how he had been fooled. [2] The emperor expressed his pleasure by keeping Stoskopff's painting and including it in his *kunstkammer* (cabinet of curiosities) in Prague.

The emperor's delight in Stoskopff's painting was not an isolated occurrence, for Ferdinand III had a comparably enthusiastic reaction to another trompe l'oeil that was presented to him in 1651, this one by the Dutch artist Samuel van Hoogstraten (Dutch, 1627 - 1678). Similarly pleased that he had been fooled by the skillfulness of the deceit, the emperor decided to "punish" the artist by keeping the painting, while at the same time honoring him with an imperial medal and a gold chain as a token of his esteem. [3] Ferdinand III's love of trompe l'oeil illusionism placed him within a tradition of princes of emperors, including his Habsburg relative Emperor Rudolf II, who had also enjoyed these painterly deceptions, and eagerly included them in their *kunstkammern*. [4] Artists whose works succeeded in fooling such powerful rulers were celebrated for their illusionistic powers. By the late 17th century a number of Dutch artists had travelled to Germany, Austria, and Scandinavia to create trompe l'oeil paintings for courtly *kunstkammern*.

Of these collections, one of the most impressive was the famed Royal Danish Kunstkammer, formed in the latter part of the 17th century by Kings Frederik III

(ruled 1648–1670) and Christian V (ruled 1670–1699). The most important trompe l’oeil artist serving the Danish kings was Cornelis Gijsbrechts (active c. 1659–1675), who served as court painter from 1668–1672. His sojourn in Copenhagen was but one of many stops in a peripatetic career that took him from his native Flanders to various courts and urban centers in the Holy Roman Empire and Scandinavia. Gijsbrechts painted a wide array of trompe l’oeils for the Royal Danish Kunstkammer, including letter racks, boards with musical instruments or hunting trophies, illusionistic cupboards, and trompe l’oeil pictures cut into the shapes of the objects they depict. However, Gijsbrechts was not the only trompe l’oeil artist at the Danish court. H. Drost, about whom little is known, painted two trompe l’oeils for the royal collection that were clearly inspired by Stoskopff’s illusionistic image of a print attached to a board. Both of Drost’s trompe l’oeil paintings depict an etching by Adriaen van Ostade (Dutch, 1610 - 1685) that seems to be attached to a pine board with red-wax seals [fig. 3].

At first glance, the similarities between the Gallery’s painting and these signed works by Drost would seem to suggest that all three were made by the same artist. However, a substantial quality difference separates them, which is particularly noticeable in the complex play of light and dark across the wrinkled rendering of Bol’s etching. The illusionism of the pine plank is also far more compelling than in Drost’s less refined painted images. Finally, the Gallery’s painting was executed on an oak panel, whereas Drost, like Stoskopff, painted his works on canvas.

The artist who made the Gallery’s striking object may have lived and trained in the Netherlands. Not only did the Dutch have a strong trompe l’oeil tradition, but the artist also clearly had Ferdinand Bol’s print at hand. A chronological framework for the painting is provided by dendrochronological examination, which indicates that the panel dates from the early 1670s. [5] This circumstantial evidence yields a possible candidate for the painter: Franciscus Gijsbrechts. Although little is known about the artist, Franciscus was the son of Cornelis Gijsbrechts and his wife, Anna Moons. He was baptized in Antwerp on February 25, 1649. [6] Franciscus undoubtedly trained with his father and probably accompanied him to Copenhagen during his residency there between 1668 and 1672. [7] In 1672 Franciscus painted a trompe l’oeil—depicting musical instruments hanging on a wooden wall—which the Danish king must have acquired for his Kunstkammer in that very year. [8]

Franciscus eventually moved to Leiden, where, according to a document dated 1674, he studied with a master from the Guild of St. Luke. [9] The fact that

Franciscus trained in Leiden is intriguing, and probably is a result of the city's excellent reputation for refined painting styles and illusionism, qualities that would be essential to his career as a trompe l'oeil artist. One wonders if Gijsbrechts studied in Leiden with Edwaert Collier (1642–1708), a renowned trompe l'oeil artist who was then a master in the artists' guild. Collier also painted similar illusionistic images of prints attached to a board by wax seals. After his training in Leiden, Franciscus returned to his native Antwerp, where he became a master in the painters' guild in 1676/1677. Nothing is known about his subsequent career.

Stylistic evidence for the proposed attribution of this work to Franciscus Gijsbrechts centers around the sophisticated play of light modelling the bends and folds of the etching's surface, which so effectively enhances its illusionistic character. One sees not only deep brownish shadows under the folds along the print's left edge, but also secondary grayer shadows that seem to indicate the presence of multiple light sources. This subtle play of light extends across the print and even picks up the ridge of the etching's plate mark. Finally, the irregularities of the print's surface are also evident through the varied width of the shadows cast by the paper on the pine board. Among the artists creating trompe l'oeil images in the 1670s, none captured these qualities of light as effectively as did this artist. The prime example of his mastery of this aspect of illusionism are his depictions of papers, such as a sheaf of landscape prints draped over a metal rod in his remarkable *Glass Cupboard Door*, c. 1675 [fig. 4]. [10] Here, one also finds a complex array of primary and secondary shadows from multiple light sources that help create the illusion of bent, folded, and rolled pieces of paper. The depiction of the graining and knot holes in the pine boards surrounding the window frame is comparable to the Gallery's trompe l'oeil in its sophisticated illusionism.

Franciscus Gijsbrechts's illusionism in *Glass Cupboard Door*, which has actual metal hinges that allow the glass door to open, extends beyond the surface of this complex object. Most notably, Franciscus created the illusion of seeing the papers through the transparent glass on the verso of the door. Interestingly, on the recto he also created the illusion of a variety of objects inside the cupboard. This phenomenon raises the possibility that the *Glass Cupboard Door* is but a portion of an even more extensive, but no longer intact, trompe l'oeil object, and that, upon opening the glass door, one would discover another illusionistic image to complete the deception. [11]

This excursus is relevant to the Gallery's *Trompe l'Oeil of an Etching by Ferdinand Bol*, for it, too, was possibly an illusionistic cover for a three-dimensional trompe

l'oeil object. The basis for this hypothesis is an early 18th-century painting by the German artist Matthias Zink (1665–1738) that depicts a pine box, seen in perspective, with its front panel slid to the side to reveal a trompe l'oeil of a framed *vanitas* painting [fig. 5]. Although Zink's *A Trompe l'Oeil Vanity* is illusionistic, it clearly depicts an actual trompe l'oeil object. Much like the Gallery's painting, the front panel of the box has on its face a trompe l'oeil of a print attached with red-wax seals, an illusionistic image that portends the experience encountered upon sliding the panel to the side. Nothing is known about the history of Zink's painting nor of the trompe l'oeil object that he depicted, but it is likely that Zink painted that image for the Prince of Eichstätt, in whose court he worked in the early 18th century. [12] In all likelihood he painted his illusionistic image for the very collector who owned the trompe l'oeil box.

The provenance of *Trompe l'Oeil of an Etching by Ferdinand Bol* cannot be traced back before the 20th century, but since this work comes from an old Viennese family, it may have originated in that area. Franciscus Gijsbrechts, like other trompe l'oeil painters of the late 17th century, found his most enthusiastic clientele in courtly settings. He may be the artist who painted a trompe l'oeil box, of which this oak panel was the lid, at one of the courts in present-day Germany or Austria.

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.

May 7, 2019

COMPARATIVE FIGURES



fig. 1 Ferdinand Bol, *Old Man with a Flowing Beard and Velvet Beret*, 1642, etching and drypoint, British Museum, London, S. 14. © The Trustees of The British Museum



fig. 2 Sebastian Stoskopff, *Trompe l'Oeil (Galatea)*, 1651, oil on canvas, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Gemäldegalerie, Vienna. © KHM-Museumsverband



fig. 3 H. Drost, *Trompe l'Oeil: Board with an Etching of a Baker Sounding His Horn*, 1650–1700, oil on canvas, Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen, inv. KMS3019



fig. 4 Franciscus Gijsbrechts, *Glass Cupboard Door*, c. 1675, oil on canvas, wood, and metal, Collection of Teresa Heinz



fig. 5 Matthias Zink, *A Trompe l'Oeil Vanity*, early 18th century, oil on panel, private collection

NOTES

- [1] The engraving that Stoskopff so accurately rendered was made in 1644 by Michel Dorigny (1617–1665) after a well-known painting by Simon Vouet (1590–1649), who was then at the height of his fame in Paris. Stoskopff may have chosen to depict that engraving for thematic reasons, for its subject reinforced the theme of *trompe l'oeil* illusionism. The mythological story recounts how the sea nymph Galatea inflamed the passion of the cyclops Polyphemus, but every time he approached her she disappeared into the waves. See Sylvia Böhmer, “Imitation et invention picturale – Les gravures peintes dans les natures mortes de Sébastien Stoskopff,” in Michèle-Caroline Heck and Sylvia Böhmer, *Sébastien Stoskopff, 1597–1657: Un maître de la nature morte* (Strasbourg, 1997), 102.
- [2] Joachim von Sandrart, *Joachim von Sandrarts Academie der Bau-, Bild- und Mahlerey-Kunste von 1675: Leben der Beruhmten Maler, Bildhauer und Baumeister*, ed. Arthur R. Petlzer (Nuremberg, 1675–1680; repr., Munich, 1925), 1:310.
- [3] Celeste Brusati, “Honorable Deceptions and Dubious Distinctions: Self-Imagery in Trompe l’Oeil,” in Olaf Koester, *Illusions: Gijsbrechts Royal Master of Deception* (Copenhagen, 1999), 50. See also Arnold Houbraken, *De Groote Schouburgh der Nederlantsche Konstschilders en Schilderessen* (The Hague, 1753; repr., Amsterdam, 1976), 2:157ff.
- [4] Celeste Brusati, “Honorable Deceptions and Dubious Distinctions: Self-Imagery in Trompe l’Oeil,” in Olaf Koester, *Illusions: Gijsbrechts Royal Master of Deception* (Copenhagen, 1999), 62–64.
- [5] The dendrochronological examination, undertaken by Pieter Klein, determined a likely date for the panel of c. 1672. This information was provided by Robert Wald in correspondence to the author dated Apr. 20, 2015, NGA curatorial files.
- [6] Information about Franciscus’s baptism date was discovered by Anaïs Moyson, who provided the RKD – Netherlands Institute for Art History with this information in an email dated July 11, 2011.
<https://rkd.nl/en/explore/artists/record?query=gijsbrechts&start=2>, accessed Feb. 24, 2017.
- [7] Olaf Koester, “Cornelius Norbertus Gijsbrechts – an Introduction,” in Olaf Koester, *Illusions: Gijsbrechts Royal Master of Deception* (Copenhagen, 1999), 42–43.
- [8] Olaf Koester, *Illusions: Gijsbrechts Royal Master of Deception* (Copenhagen, 1999), 220–221, cat. no. 35. The painting is signed and dated.

- [9] Olaf Koester, “Cornelius Norbertus Gijsbrechts – an Introduction,” in Olaf Koester, *Illusions: Gijsbrechts Royal Master of Deception* (Copenhagen, 1999), 42. The document notes that Gijsbrechts had not paid his dues to his (unidentified) master.
- [10] See Anna Tummers’s entry on this painting in Sybille Ebert-Schifferer, *Deceptions and Illusions: Five Centuries of Trompe l’Oeil Painting* (Washington, DC, 2002), 253–255, cat. no. 63.
- [11] It is unlikely that Franciscus Gijsbrechts was the first to create such a complex object. That honor may reside with Cornelis Gijsbrechts in his *Trompe l’Oeil: A Cabinet of Curiosities with an Ivory Tankard*, 1670, Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen, which also has real hinges that allow the glass door to open. The glass in this painting similarly allows the viewer to “view” objects within the cupboard. See Olaf Koester, *Illusions: Gijsbrechts Royal Master of Deception* (Copenhagen, 1999), 164–167, cat. no. 12.
- [12] The Bishopric of Eichstätt was a small ecclesiastical principality of the Holy Roman Empire located in the present-day state of Bavaria.
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TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The painting is executed on a support consisting of a 1.1 cm thick single oak panel. On the reverse, all four edges have been beveled to a thickness of 0.5 cm or less, but there is no evidence of alteration to the panel’s size.

The ground consists of a thick white layer that obscures the wood grain. The number of ground layers is unknown. While no underdrawing was detected with infrared reflectography (IRR), a reserve was left for the painted etching. Under magnification, it is clear that the paint layers of the background only extend up to the edges of the painted print. [1]

The paint medium is estimated to be oil, and in general the paints were applied thinly. The red-wax seal was painted slightly thicker, as were the edges of the painted print. The thickness of the paint in these areas helps to create the three-dimensional quality of the objects in the composition. The painted wood-grain background was executed by first applying a warm underlayer, followed by several thin layers of successively cooler tones textured with a brush. Lastly, the lines of the etching were applied in black paint, and under magnification it appears that the painted lines bead up in some areas.

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The support, ground, and paint layers are all in good condition. There are a few large losses to ground and paint in the upper-right corner of the painted etching. There is a fine craquelure in the red-wax seal but not elsewhere. There is dust embedded in the paint, though this must have settled on the surface while the paint was still wet. The painting was treated in 2016. At that time the varnish and some overpaint were removed and a split in the panel was filled and inpainted.

Dina Anchin

May 7, 2019

TECHNICAL NOTES

[1] Infrared reflectography was carried out using a Santa Barbara Focalplane InSb camera filtered to 1.5–1.8 microns (H filter).

PROVENANCE

Dr. Friedrich Tröster [d. 1956], Vienna; by inheritance to his daughter, Dr. Sieglinde Kretschmer, Vienna; sold 2015 to (Galerie Nissl, Eschen, Liechtenstein); purchased 19 February 2016 by NGA.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

2005 Loan to display with permanent collection, Liechtenstein Museum, Vienna, 2005-2015.

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