

## What Technique is Used by the Artist?

Once artists figured out how to construct these standard views, however, it wasn't long before they figured out that certain minor tweaks might take things one step further: these few tweaks could make a viewer read the distant or imaginary as here and now; could turn a normal picture into trompe l'oeil.<sup>1</sup>

You could tweak the imaginary space within your picture to look like it extends the real space that your viewer is standing in. Portray your picture's space as a glimpse through an actual window in the wall, for instance, or as giving access to a niche carved out in it, and viewers will understand that they should take the painted for the real. Five centuries ago any rich Italian could ask a painter to fresco a ceiling so that it looked domed, or a flat wall so that it looked ornately carved away, or that they registered as such, even if a guest could tell at once that they were seeing paint, not masonry.

It is an almost fatal flaw that this exhibition doesn't even hint at any of this crucial wall painting, the earliest and most important trompe l'oeil of post-Roman Western art. Even a full-scale photographic reproduction mounted on a temporary ceiling would have done the trick, given that most of the originals are permanently stuck in their palazzo.

In 18<sup>th</sup> Century America, Charles Willson Peale of Philadelphia played a similar trick in his hometown's Independence Hall. In 1795, he mounted a canvas inside the door frame of a closet, and painted it – fairly badly – to look as though the doorway were in fact open, with his two sons stepping through it and up a stairway leading back beyond the wall. He even put a real wooden step on our side of the painting, as an extension of the painted steps that lead away inside it. (In one of their typically delightful grace notes, designers at the National Gallery have reproduced that wooden step to go along with their installation of the picture.)

<sup>1</sup> trompe l'oeil: French expression for art that “fools the eye”