

ILLUSIONS

Trompe l'oeil (trick the eye) is a hyper-realist style of art which creates an illusion that the objects depicted are the real thing. It has a long history, from Ancient Greece to the present era, but its tradition has been particularly strong in Europe and America. Examples of trompe l'oeil can be seen in museums and contemporary exhibitions throughout the world, not only as paintings but in sculpture and new technologies.

Materials such as latex and polyester resin have enabled modern sculptors to create realistic works that could not be possible in earlier times, where modelled and carved statues were simply painted to enhance their realism. The sculptures of Duane Hanson or Fischli and Weiss have a lifelike character that is uncanny and cinematic special effects are examples of modern trompe l'oeil that can convince us that an illusion is the real thing.

Sometimes a painting may be designed to simulate the shape of the objects depicted. For example, a painting on a flat surface which is then cut out (chantourne) or a three dimensional shape that supports an image. In this way an artist creates painted sculptures that can blur the difference between reality and art. These techniques may be ingenious enough to create lifelike images but the art of deception may also contain ideas and meanings that go beyond realism for its own sake.

If a person is deceived by a trompe l'oeil image, it means the viewer has misread what is in front of their eyes. When we witness the upheaval of contemporary events, question our relationship with the environment, or reflect on how much society has changed in a generation, it must cast doubt on how we look at the world. The religions and sciences have endeavoured to enlighten us about who we are and why we are here but the mystery still remains. Trompe l'oeil realism may connect art with these personal and social conditions when it portrays something that is not what it appears to be.

With heightened realism, the intention is to create the look and feel of life but this is not the same thing as being photographic. We would not describe the people and things around us as photographs, therefore the same reasoning should apply to trompe l'oeil art where images are not just pictures but the equivalent of things that belong in the real world.

At a glance, it might seem that a painted illusion demands a lot of skill, but that is not necessarily so. A good way to clarify this is to compare a magician to an artist. A magician's sleight of hand can weave magical deceptions, but they can also be revealed as tricks. The magic of trompe l'oeil is not the same thing, because the thoughts and feelings that make art cannot be explained in a similar way.

Trompe l'oeil paintings may represent the world we think we know, but it's not always about what the eye sees. What has been concealed by a cloth, what is behind a door, what was once on a display board are images that can only exist in the viewer's imagination. What is depicted can conjure what is absent.

Mystics say the world isn't real, that it's all an illusion. But when a person mistakes an artwork for the actual thing, it must be because illusions are real or that at last they have a connection to reality, which is why there is confusion in the first place. When we look at an illusion, we are confronting ourselves and the world around us.

Shane Jones