



Objects Can Tell Stories: Be a Detail Detective



William Michael Harnett

Born Ireland, 1848-1892 (active USA)

The Secretary's Table, 1870

Oil on canvas

SBMA

John Frederick Peto

Born and died USA, 1854-1907

My Studio Door, 1895

Oil on canvas

SBMA

Grades/Level: Elementary (K-6)

Subjects: Visual Arts, Language Arts, History

Time Required: Two class periods

Lesson Overview:

- Students will learn how to read visual clues
- Students will learn how everyday objects can communicate information --about people, and about history
- Students will learn about life in America in the 19th century
- Students will write in a variety of genres in response to the two paintings (See Writing Activities below)
- Students will create a personal still life/portrait drawing or collage using objects that have meaning for them



William Michael Harnett (born County Cork, Ireland 1848-died New York,1892)

The Secretary's Table, 1870

Oil on canvas

Signed and dated: WM Harnett/1870

Inscribed on writing pad: *June 28/see Mr Clarke/at St George Hotel*

SBMA, gift of Mrs. Sterling Morton 60.60

Discussion Questions

1. What objects do you see in this painting?

A marble table top; wood table; ink stand; quill pen; blue envelope sealed with red sealing wax; sealing wax stamp, notepad with notepaper on which is written: June 28/ See Mr Clarke/at St. George Hotel; a pencil resting on notepad; a stick of red sealing wax leaning against a green box with gold border; notecards are decorated with a circular fan with a crane and stalks of bamboo; letter opener; candlestick with candle.

2. How did people write to each other in 1870?

(Typewriter? E-mail? Text messaging?) NO! Not yet invented!

People had to write to each other with pen and ink, by hand! That's why penmanship was so important.

3. Imagine that you are a Time Traveller. It is 1870 and you are in Philadelphia. This is your table and you are sitting down to write a letter. What do you do?

First you select a notecard from the box; then you dip your quill in the inkpot; you write your letter on a notecard, dipping your quill pen in the ink every time it gets dry; put notecard in envelope; then you put the stick of sealing wax in the candle flame to soften it; press a blob of wax onto envelope; press seal weight into the wax. As it cools it hardens and seals your letter with your personal stamp.

Note to Teachers: if possible, do a simple demonstration using real sealing wax (available at any art or craft store)—or any other soft modeling compound that will take an impression.

4. Can you find the clues that tell us how the sealing wax was used?

Clue: follow the red dots.

*Why do you suppose that people used sealing wax? To make their letters private. If the seal was broken, they would know that someone else had read it.
Why didn't they just lick the envelope? Answer: self-sticking envelopes weren't invented yet.*

5. Who do you think Mr. Clarke was?

A friend of the artist? Some people think Mr. Clarke was the person Harnett made this painting for, and putting his name in the painting like this was their little joke.

Conclusion. Add up all the clues and what do you get?

This painting shows us a real person's writing desk as it was used in Philadelphia in the 1870s.



John Frederick Peto

My Studio Door, 1895

Oil painting on canvas

Signed and dated: John F. Peto/1895

SBMA, Gift of Mrs. Sterling Morton, 60.76

1. Describe the objects do you see in this painting.

From the top down:

The number 2 on an address plate; a pistol; a bone-handled bowie knife; a brass lantern with candle; a bugle; a horn for gunpowder; ammunition pouch

What else? A worn wooden door, rusty hinges; nails; strings hanging from the nails that hold the objects.

2. Do these things look new or old? What clues tell you the answer?

Dusty, broken glass, rusty door hinges.

3. Why do you think an artist would make a painting of rusty, dusty old things?

What do you think they meant to him?

The bone-handled bowie knife, according to Peto family tradition, was thought to have come from the battlefield of Gettysberg, in which Peto's father participated.

In fact, all of the objects in Peto's painting can be identified as Civil War era field gear. They are: a single shot black powder pistol, a deer antler bowie knife (for hunting), a dusty lantern with broken glass and candle, a keyed bugle which was an early attempt to have chromatic notes played on a bugle (which is a valveless instrument); a leather cartridge pouch; an unidentified small horn item; a horn powder flask, and another powder flask of metal or leather.

4. The objects in Peto's painting all come from the time of the Civil War (1864). But the painting was made in 1895. How long after the Civil War was this painting made? *Thirty years later.*

Why do you think Peto made a painting with things that were so old and had been used so long ago?

They had special meaning for him, memories; they were part of American history, and part of his family history.

Peto's father died in the same year this painting was made, 1895, so it may also be a remembrance of his father.

5. What about mood? Would you describe this as a happy painting?

If not, what words would you use to describe the mood, or feeling?

Sad, serious, melancholy.

How do light and color contribute to the mood? The painting is almost monochromatic: browns, with a pale, soft golden light illuminating the objects. The overall effect is very somber.

Conclusion: *this painting seems to be Peto's personal memorial to the Civil War—and probably a tribute to his father as well.*

Compare and Contrast

In what ways are these two paintings similar?

- 1. They are both "still life" paintings—a selection of objects arranged on the surface of the canvas within a very shallow space.*
- 2. They were both painted in the late 19th century: the Harnett in 1879, the Peto in 1895.*
- 3. They both show us things that real people used over one hundred years ago—so each painting makes American history come to life.*
- 4. They both tell a story about a real person: objects that were meaningful to them, tools of their trade.*

In what ways are they different?

1. Kinds of objects: The Peto shows objects that are Civil War memorabilia; the Harnett shows a writing desk that is being used by someone who may just have stepped away for a moment.

2. Colors. The Harnett colors are bright and clear; the Peto is almost monochromatic, shades of brown and burnished gold, with a lone highlight of white in the candle.

3. Light. In the Harnett, the light is clear and bright. The Peto is very dark; little shafts of light pick out individual objects, but the overall effect is very dark.

4. Painting technique: the Harnett is “fool the eye” super-illusionistic. The Peto is convincing, yet the painting technique is softer, less hard-edge.

5. Composition (the way the objects are arranged). The Peto objects are all dangling from strings and nails, layered on top of each other in what seems to be a random, haphazard way. The Harnett objects are arranged in a much more orderly fashion—a neat, horizontal row in which we can see each object clearly. This secretary looks organized!

Writing Activities

1. Imagine you are sitting at the Secretary’s table writing a letter about what you did today. Write it in fancy 19th century penmanship.
2. Write a self-portrait poem. Include words that describe things that you use, things that you love, things that interest you. For example, hiking shoes, a soccer ball, a paintbrush, a computer mouse, a musical instrument, a book.
3. Students can write compare and contrast paragraphs or essays comparing the two paintings
4. After a demonstration, students can write sequential step-by-step directions for the process of letter writing in the 19th century.
5. Students will write a self-portrait poem

Art Activities

Make a still life using objects from your own life that tell something about you.

Materials: Large drawing paper; pencils, markers, crayons or oil pastels; scissors, glue sticks.

1. Using paper and pencils, markers, crayons or oil pastels, have students make drawings of objects from their own lives that have special meaning for them. They may also incorporate words, if they like. Have them cut out the objects and experiment with different arrangements (compositions) on the paper. When they are satisfied with their composition, have them glue the objects to the paper to make a “self-portrait.”
2. Ask students to bring in actual objects that have meaning for them. Have them arrange the objects on their desks, thinking about composition as they arrange their objects. Think about color, texture, height, what direction you want your objects to face, what are the connecting pieces, how big and small relate to each other. What are the important details that you want to reveal? Choose things that have special meaning for you.
 - Take a photograph of each child’s still life.
 - Have the students make a sketch of the still life they have created. Their photograph or drawing can be pasted on the same page as their self-portrait poem.

Background Information for Teachers

Still Life Painting in America

The term “still life” comes from the Dutch word “stilleven” and American still life paintings are very much like 17th century Dutch still life paintings: arrangements of flowers, or various kinds of food, or everyday objects depicted in a super-realistic technique that “fooled the eye.” These paintings, in Holland as in America, were popular decorations for the homes of prosperous middle class people living in cities.

The earliest still life paintings in America were of fruit and vegetables (early 19th c.); flower paintings appear in the 1840s; paintings of game and fish in the 1860s; manufactured objects later in the century.

These kinds of paintings were dismissed by art critics for their lowbrow subjects (ordinary objects from everyday life) and their craftsmanlike technique – “merely” imitating nature rather than requiring any real artistic skill or imagination.

“Fool-the-Eye” painting (Trompe-l’Oeil)

This is the term for paintings that are so meticulously crafted that they seem magically real. In America they were regarded with some suspicion, as “deceptions” or a kind of con game. Harnett actually got into trouble with the IRS because in some of his paintings there were dollar bills that were so convincingly real looking that some people thought he was a forger.

William Michael Harnett (1848-1892)

Born in Clonakilty, County Cork, Ireland, came to Philadelphia as a young boy. His family were all humble craftspeople; he trained as a silverware engraver. Studied art in Philadelphia and New York, began painting small, precise still life paintings. By 1880 had saved enough money to go to Europe; lived in Munich and Paris for six years, returning to New York in 1886. Harnett became the most successful and popular still life painter in late 19th century America before his untimely death at age 42. But his meticulous “trompe-l’oeil” (fool the eye) technique, as well as his lowly subject matter, was dismissed by art critics as “mere” imitation, requiring little skill or craft. Harnett was “rediscovered in the 1950s, recognized not only for his technical skill but also for introducing a new type of subject: well-loved, personal objects in interesting combinations.

John Frederick Peto (1854-1907)

Peto was born in Philadelphia and trained at the Philadelphia Academy of Fine Arts, where he met Harnett, who was six years his senior. They became friends, and in the early years of his career, Peto was very influenced by Harnett, making paintings of simple objects like drinking mugs, pipes and newspapers in a style very like Harnett’s. Peto’s career never really took off, and he struggled to make ends meet, working as a photographer, as well as a musician. He played the cornet in a band. In 1889 he moved to Island Heights, New Jersey, where he continued to paint, in obscurity, until his death. Peto remained virtually unknown until the 1950s, when an art historian discovered that not only were many of his paintings wrongly attributed to Harnett, but that an unscrupulous art dealer had forged “Harnett” signatures on them.