

Ease
William M. Harnett William M. Harnett, American, 1848-1892
1887, Oil on canvas, 48 x 52 3/4 inches
Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas

About the Artist

William Harnett was born in Ireland and grew up in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, after coming to this country with his family. During the 1860s and 1870s, he studied art at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts and at Cooper Union in New York. During those years, he earned his living as an engraver of table silver.

In 1880, Harnett traveled to Europe where he painted and studied the 17th-century masters of still-life painting. He spent most of this period in Munich, Germany. *Munich Still Life*, one of Harnett's paintings from this time, is in the Dallas Museum of Art. After studying and working there for six years, he returned to New York and painted *Ease* in 1887. During the next few years, he produced his most important works. But by 1890, he began to suffer from arthritis, an affliction that troubled him until his death in 1892.

About the Art

The subject of this painting is a collection of objects that give us a portrait of the man who commissioned the work and that tell us about some of the values of his time. The patron, James T. Abbe, a wealthy Massachusetts business man, commissioned Harnett to do this painting of objects from his library. Except for the flute, which Harnett also used in other paintings, it is believed that most of the items belonged to Abbe.

James T. Abbe was the owner of the Holyoke Envelope Company and was the president of the company that published the Springfield Daily Union. Harnett has placed an envelope at the center of the painting. A newspaper symbolizes Abbe's other business interests. The books, sheet music, and musical instruments give the viewer more information about the life of this man and others during the last years of the nineteenth century. From the objects pictured, the viewer learns about an educated and successful man and about a time when value was placed on the activities and life style suggested by the objects seen on the table top.

Additional Information

A report in the Springfield Daily Republican stated that Harnett spent seven months painting *Ease*. Mr. Abbe sold it a few months later to a wealthy California railroad tycoon, Collis P. Huntington, for \$6,000. After the sale, the location of the painting was unknown until 1971. Mr. Huntington was very wealthy and had at least three mansions, all of which were filled with art. When Huntington died, his art works were dispersed, and the only proof that Harnett had painted *Ease* was a photograph that had been taken of the original painting. One of Huntington's mansions was in San Francisco, and when

much of that city was destroyed in the San Francisco earthquake and fire of 1906, the painting was assumed to have been destroyed as well.

In March, 1971, while working on a biography of William Harnett, Alfred Frankenstein received a telephone call from the owner of an art gallery in Castro Valley, California. She described to him a painting that had been brought to her for cleaning and that she suspected might have been done by Harnett. Mr. Frankenstein asked her if the painting had a palm leaf fan on the right-hand side, and when she said, "Yes", he knew he had found the missing painting.

As Frankenstein pieced together the story of the many years since the painting had last been seen, he discovered that it apparently had been damaged in the famous fire. It had been trimmed on all sides, probably to remove the smoke or fire damaged areas. The original signature that had been in the lower left corner had been removed when the canvas was trimmed. The painting had been in the possession of one family for several generations and had been in the basement of one of the family members for many years. She had inherited it, and when she began to think that it could be a lost masterpiece, she decided to contact someone who might be able to identify it.

A New York gallery owner was very excited when he received a letter telling him that the painting had been found. Up to that time *Ease* had been a known unknown, a lost painting of which proof existed only in the form of a photograph. The photograph let experts know what it had originally looked like, but they had not known where it was for all of those years!

About the Time and Place

The writer Mark Twain called this era "The Gilded Age." During this period, industry and business flourished. Many people enjoyed wealth and prosperity, but the years following the Civil War were a time of many changes and numerous problems. Workers formed unions in order to gain better wages and working conditions. A few states were beginning to allow women to vote, and reformers called for changes to reduce poverty and to improve the living conditions of the poor.

The newly rich citizens built large mansions and filled them with art works, books, and decorations. They spent their leisure time attending operas, visiting luxurious resorts, and participating in activities that they felt were signs of their social position. Those with less money were involved in less extravagant pastimes. They attended circuses, fairs, and sporting events. They enjoyed songs played on parlor pianos or from records on the early, crude phonographs. Many read magazines filled with pictures, and dime novels -- inexpensive books that told stories of adventure and the value of hard work and courage-- were popular.