ON NOVEMBER 23, 1886, Detective Andrew Drummond of the United States Secret Service summoned artist William Harnett from his 14th Street studio. At the time, Drummond was chief operative for New York, leading the Secret Service’s effort to curb counterfeiting in the city. Printing and selling fake currency had been an issue—and a business—since the early nineteenth century, but, after the American Civil War, reining in these activities became a primary means to reassert federal sovereignty. The week before he sent for Harnett, Drummond had questioned two other men in connection with the practice, and they had tipped him off to a small painting of a paper note hanging in Theodore Stewart’s saloon on Warren Street in New York. Still Life with a Ten-Cent Bill (Shinplaster) is one of four paintings of money that Harnett produced in 1879. Smaller than a sheet of loose-leaf, the painting pictures a weathered and worn version of the eponymous note against a flat black background. According to Drummond’s log, the suspects asked him why the bar could “have this exact copy when we are forbidden to make a poor
imitation? In response to this query, Drummond and a colleague went to the bar, examined the painting, and “found it to be the closest thing to a note [they] ever saw.”

The two agents arrested Stewart, seized a similar painting by Harnett titled *Still Life—Five-Dollar Bill* (fig. 1) from the bar, and called in the artist for questioning.

Drummond did not record the questions he asked Harnett, but he did take note of one of the artist’s responses. Likely asked whether his paintings were counterfeit bills, the artist responded that “he could engrave a better note than he painted as his trade was an engraver.” Indeed, from 1865 through 1875, Harnett had worked at silver firms like Wood & Hughes and perhaps Tiffany & Co., where he inscribed decorative motifs and monograms onto silverware. This work had sustained the artist during his academic training. By the late 1880s, however, he had long since left his job as a silver engraver and become a relatively successful painter. For fifteen years, he had created still lifes of inanimate objects and, when Drummond started his investigation, was recently returned from a four-year sojourn in Europe. Harnett’s brief response to the detective, then, is telling. If he had wanted to produce an exact replica—a counterfeit—of a ten-cent bill, he would have used tools and techniques appropriate to the task of printing paper money. But he did not. He applied paint to canvas and, by implication, had something else—something less sinister and more serious—in mind. This
book takes Harnett and his paintings at their word, setting aside the popular and scholarly assumption that his work intended to deceive and, instead, confronting its significance as fine art. To the U.S. government, *Still Life with a Ten-Cent Bill (Shin-plaster)* was a potential counterfeit note; but to Harnett, it was a still-life painting of a man-made object.

Harnett’s oeuvre can in fact be divided into distinct and relatively sequential bodies of work based on the types of objects he depicted. Like *Still Life with a Ten-Cent Bill (Shin-plaster)* and *Still Life—Five-Dollar Bill*, his most striking early works transcribe popular relics of the Civil War. But most of the paintings he created in the late 1870s comprise tabletop still lifes that include all manner of legible texts. In the early 1880s, when Harnett lived in Europe, he started making paintings of specimens hanging against wooden planks—first, animal corpses; later, upon his return to the United States, antiquated implements and tools. In the early 1890s, in what would be the final years of his life, Harnett made large-scale paintings filled with eclectic assortments of manufactures. Art historians have done incredible work to decipher the iconography of Harnett’s paintings, but the distinct phases into which his oeuvre can be divided suggest that he was less concerned with the specific models that he depicted than with different types of objects. Material culture has always played an important role in American life, but it assumed new significance in the postwar era, amid the expansion of industrial manufacturing, as scholars have recognized, but also a fundamental revaluation of the body.

In their moment, the objects that Harnett depicted were part of broader conversations within the humanities and social sciences about what it meant to be human. The kinds of mass-produced relics, legible texts, specimens, and manufactures that appeared in his paintings were also to be found in the world around him—in scrapbooks, around the home, in literary journals and museum displays, and at industrial sites—where they became vehicles to negotiate individual, cultural, and other group identities. Attending primarily to late nineteenth-century literature, Bill Brown has explained how and why this impulse responded to rampant industrialization. Increased mechanization led to a preponderance of man-made stuff, but also a decline in craftsmanship and the cultural value placed on it. In an effort to understand humanity’s place in this new world of mass-produced goods, late nineteenth-century American writers projected their fears and desires onto man-made objects and explored their existential concerns through them. As he introduced man-made objects into the genre of still life, Harnett imbued his paintings with similar imperatives and concerns. His work pictures the stuff of the modern—or postwar—world, but it represents metaphysical aspects of the human condition. In this respect, Harnett’s paintings participate in the subtle reimagining of selfhood that took place in late nineteenth-century America, but they also reveal much about painting, politics, and the relationship between them in the postwar era.

Since the early nineteenth century, artists, critics, and the public had held history painting and landscape painting in the highest esteem. Via depictions of the human
figure and nature, these genres were seen to best speak to the concerns of the body politic. But, as an art student in the 1860s and 1870s, Harnett witnessed how the Civil War and its aftermath challenged the ability of both specific types of bodies and regions to address the national character. The artist’s work suggests that he saw in still life a plausible, if unexpected, vehicle to affirm the values and function of academic painting—namely, to address and represent the nation as a whole. But it would take significant work on Harnett’s part to adapt the genre to this purpose. In both Europe and the United States, since the late eighteenth century at least, still life had largely been synonymous with depictions of fruits and flowers, and academicians, critics, and the public considered imitation and decoration the genre’s primary functions.11 Harnett trained at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (PAFA) in Philadelphia and the National Academy of Design in New York City, where this logic was inculcated, but the cultural and political demands of his moment radically transformed his perception of, and approach to, still life. As social conflicts raged, Harnett hoped that the genre could elevate painting above politics. Ironically, though, his work ultimately reveals the impossibility of that project. As he sought to avoid divisive subject matter, Harnett subtly if insistently affirmed a rather circumscribed vision of the nation, its people, and perhaps painting itself.

HISTORY PAINTING AND THE ACADEMIC TRADITION

Although today he is known as a painter of trompe l’oeil (“trick the eye”), Harnett was an academically trained artist. For just over ten years, he took life classes and antique classes at art academies in Philadelphia and New York, primarily PAFA and the National Academy of Design.12 These classes taught students to depict the human body in motion and were the cornerstone of the curriculum at both institutions.13 In antique classes, students worked from casts of classical statuary and, eventually, they “graduated” to life classes in which they worked from live models. Although published documents on both institutions do not explicitly state the goals and intentions behind this curriculum, it clearly served the subjects and imperatives of history painting. The most esteemed genre in the hierarchy of subject matters, history painting addressed pivotal moments in the recent or distant past—either real or imagined—that painters conveyed via multi-figure, narrative compositions.14 Drawing the human body in a range of poses prepared students for this task. Several of Harnett’s antique studies survive and attest to his training in the genre. His Venus de Milo (fig. 2) and Borghese Warrior (fig. 3) are earnest efforts that see the young artist attempting to come to grips with anatomy, foreshortening, light, and form. Further, these exercises also introduced Harnett to two of the most well-known pictorial reference points in the classical tradition. One need only look at John Singleton Copley’s Watson and the Shark (1778, National Gallery of Art and Museum of Fine Arts, Boston) to see the ways in which early modern artists deployed sculptures like the Borghese Warrior to imbue contemporary events with moral messages and gravitas.
Yet, despite the structure of the curriculum at both PAFA and the National Academy, history painting never gained as much traction in the United States as it did in Europe, specifically England and France. Scholars have proffered several reasons for this disparity, including the lack of institutional support from a church or the state, few examples to follow, the amount of time such works took to make, the country’s youth, and the amount of space such large canvases required. To these considerations, we might add a theory proffered by an unidentified nineteenth-century critic: namely, a national identity that was in flux throughout much of the nineteenth century, and one that differed—in its democratic character—from the monarchical regimes from which the genre had emerged. Nonetheless, the nation did produce some noteworthy examples of the genre, John Trumbull’s massive canvases for the U.S. Capitol among them. But, for the most part, throughout the nineteenth century,
artists pursued the genre's imperatives through landscape painting. Works by Thomas Cole and Albert Bierstadt, for example, pictured the Northeast and the Western Territories, respectively, as emblematic of the nation's past and future. From approximately 1825 through 1875, such depictions of the natural world dominated the annual exhibitions at American art academies. As Angela Miller has argued, landscape painting served to “root nationalism in the physical body of the republic.” But the sectionalism that attended the Civil War, the influence of Impressionism and Symbolism, and the rise of industrialization complicated this imperative.

Thus, in the 1860s and 1870s, when Harnett was a student at PAFA and the National Academy, the future of academic painting was in question. Given landscape’s critical decline, the art world doubled down on its commitment to figure drawing, which retained its connection to history painting. At mid-century, both PAFA and the National Academy moved into permanent homes and worked to standardize their curricula. Although enrollment declined during the war, the National Academy reaffirmed its commitment to artistic training (versus exhibition activities) at this time and, in 1870, the school would find its first paid, full-time drawing instructor in Lemuel Wilmarth. Though little known today, Wilmarth was a well-respected instructor in figure drawing in his time. In the ensuing decade, the National Academy would increase the number of classes it offered and the number of instructors it hired, initiating “a systemic program based on the art academies of Europe.” Although PAFA did not move into its permanent home until 1876, for several decades prior, it, too, had worked toward “updating its training methods by adding rigor to what was taught and structure to the extramural arrangements between student and master artists of previous decades.” The hiring and administrative advancement of Christian Schussele were key to these efforts; the artist taught at the school from the 1850s onward and was appointed superintendent in 1868. One of the foremost artists in Philadelphia at the time, Schussele offered both introductory and advanced classes in drawing the human figure.

In addition to his instruction, the artist’s paintings also served as models to his students. History paintings like The Power of the Gospel: Zeisberger Preaching to the Indians (1862, Moravian Archives), King Solomon and the Iron Worker (fig. 4), and Washington Irving and His Literary Friends at Sunnyside (1864, National Portrait Gallery) comprise elaborate multi-figure compositions like those the artist trained his students to produce. PAFA would acquire King Solomon and the Iron Worker in the twentieth century, but it purchased other history paintings throughout the postwar era that were meant not only to build the national canon, but also to supplement the curriculum at the school. These acquisitions included Benjamin West’s Christ Rejected (1814, PAFA) and Penn’s Treaty with the Indians (1771–72, PAFA), as well as John Vanderlyn’s Ariadne Asleep on the Island of Naxos (1809–14, PAFA), and several works by one of the institution’s founders, Charles Willson Peale.

Despite the academy’s avowed commitment to history painting, though, the genre continued to be a relatively marginal pursuit among American artists. Its near
absence from the annual exhibitions in the late 1860s was particularly jarring in light of the recent war. Given that military battles had long been a staple of history painting, the Civil War seemed an obvious and likely subject for painters. Yet, as critics noted, few such works were forthcoming. Likely addressing the annual exhibition at the National Academy of Design in 1867, a critic for the New York Herald lamented: “Aside from one or two historical portraits and a very few other exceptions, our artists do not here evince any direct powerful influence of the late war upon their minds.” Like his colleagues at other papers, the writer struggled to come to grips with this fact. He suggested that perhaps not enough time had passed since the war; that religious sentiment had significantly declined; and that, as previously noted, history painting may have been more suited to aristocracies than to democracies.

Modern scholars have affirmed this claim and proffered several other reasons for the lack of paintings about the Civil War, including changing conceptions of history and the rise of photography. But Harnett’s still lifes and, more specifically, his turn away from the body offer new and unexpected insight into this phenomenon. His focus on objects reveals the ways in which the politics and visual culture of the war complicated the conventions of academic painting. At PAFA and the National Academy, depictions of the human body in motion had been the foundation and mark of
artistic achievement. For example, Schussele’s *King Solomon and the Iron Worker* comprises a veritable catalogue of poses reminiscent of the studies Harnett and others completed at these institutions. The painting depicts the moment after King Solomon controversially invited an iron worker to take a seat of honor beside his throne at the dedication of the Temple of Jerusalem. As he attempts to halt the dissenting crowds, Solomon points toward the iron worker, whose bared torso attests to the labor he put into the construction of the building. Each figure, including those in the crowd, is carefully disposed so as to convey—via his or her body—their age, temperament, and stature. As argued in chapter 1, however, in the wake of the Civil War, the white male body ceased to be a reliable signifier of one’s citizenship and even humanity. In still life, Harnett saw a viable, if unlikely, solution to the challenge that the war and its aftermath posed to the legibility of the body, to the execution of history painting, and, thereby, to the cultural significance of painting in general.

Since the early nineteenth century, art academies had defined the function and standards of painting in the United States. In 1805, artists and entrepreneurs founded PAFA upon the model of the American Academy of the Arts in New York. Like the professionals who, in large part, established that institution, they saw the arts as the responsibility and mark of a successful and democratic free state. In his address upon the opening of the New York academy in 1816, Governor DeWitt Clinton declared that the arts would “excite labor, produce riches, enlarge the sphere of innocent amusements, increase the stock of harmless pleasure, expand our intellectual powers, improve our moral faculties, stimulate to illustrious deeds, enhance the charms of virtue, diffuse the glories of heroism, augment the public wealth, and extend the national reputation.” In other words, the fine arts would lead to greater productivity and wealth, but also provide worthy diversions; they would document the country’s history, but also manifest its aspirations on the world stage. By contrast, artists—rather than professionals—were the driving force behind the National Academy. Frustrated with the American Academy of the Arts and, especially, its emphasis on exhibitions over artistic training, men like Samuel F.B. Morse conceived the National Academy as an “independent drawing association” that would focus on and foster artistic development. Modeling the institution upon European art schools, these artists sought to define painting as a liberal art as opposed to a trade.

Whether their interests were economic or cultural, global or local, these institutions cultivated technical skills that would enable artists to produce work of national significance. Prior to the founding of these academies, portraiture created for the private market had dominated the cultural landscape in the United States. In a letter (c. 1767) to Benjamin West (or a maritime intermediary to him), John Singleton Copley famously bemoaned the state of the arts in the British colonies:

> A taste of painting is too much Wanting to afford any kind of helps; and was it not for preserving the resemble[n]ce of particular persons, painting would not
be known in the plac[e]. The people generally regard it no more than any other usefull trade, as they sometimes term it, like that of a Carpenter tailor, or shew maker, not as one of the most noble Arts in the World.33

The founding of American art academies was meant to rectify this situation and cultivate more ambitious projects among both artists and patrons alike. Unlike commissioned portraits, which picture select individuals, history painting and landscape painting were understood to represent the body politic as a whole.34 Via depictions of the past and of nature, they addressed the perceived interests, goals, and values of the state. As the war complicated the legibility of both the body and nature, it threw academic painting into question. For Harnett, still life and objects emerged as a vehicle through which to reimagine history painting and, thereby, reaffirm the cultural significance of the medium itself.

STILL LIFE AND THE POLITICS OF PAINTING
IN THE GILDED AGE

To be sure, still life was an unlikely vehicle for this ambitious project. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it struggled to gain acceptance among American academicians and those who aspired to their status. Like European artists, Charles Willson Peale and his ilk perceived the genre as a mere exercise in technical skill.35 A rare exception was Peale’s son Raphaelle, who dedicated his career to it. Much to the chagrin of his famous father, from approximately 1810 until his premature death in 1825, Raphaelle focused almost exclusively on still life, producing small paintings of fruits, raw meats, and vegetables. As scholars Alexander Nemerov, David C. Ward, and Sidney Hart have discussed, works like Cutlet and Vegetables (1816, Timken Museum of Art) were so exceptional, indeed so marginal, in their day that they read as a challenge to Republican notions of art, selfhood, and the seemingly inextricable relationship between them. Rather than the Republican elite, the younger Peale pictured organic foodstuffs that evoked the brute carnality of the body and rejected the aesthetic ambitions of portraiture as a genre.36 For the most part, however, academic artists of the era saw still life as a supplement to the drawing classes that were the basis of the curriculum at institutions like PAFA and the National Academy. The genre was an opportunity to practice mixing colors and applying paint to canvas.37 For example, in his capacity as an instructor at PAFA, Thomas Eakins often told his students to go “paint an egg.”38 Indeed, such was the artist’s commitment to this exercise that he whittled wooden eggs—that look more like domed cylinders—and painted them various colors for this express purpose.39

Eakins and Harnett actually overlapped at PAFA—Harnett was a student there in 1877, the year after the institution hired Eakins as an instructor—so the younger artist may very well have benefited from the famed painter’s instruction.40 At the very least, Harnett’s only surviving painted sketch (fig. 5) suggests that he was acquainted with the kind of still-life exercises that Eakins championed. The small canvas, only twelve
by nine inches, bears a pipe, a small white vase, a turnip, an apple, and a glass tumbler with the remnants of what we might assume to be whiskey. These objects are not arranged into a coherent tableau; rather, each one occupies its own pictorial space, and Harnett takes this opportunity to render its unique texture and color. He conveys the transparency of the tumbler, the delicacy of the white receptacle, and the matte surface of the pipe. The goal was clearly to imitate these objects as closely as possible.

When Harnett first took up painting full time, he applied this imperative to traditional still-life subjects. Witness, for example, *A Wooden Basket of Catawba Grapes* (fig. 6), which hews to traditional conceptions of the genre and to the kinds of paintings that Raphaele Peale had made over fifty years earlier. It pictures the eponymous fruit in a wooden container sitting on a marble tabletop. According to the chronology compiled on the occasion of a 1993 Harnett retrospective, the artist continued to show (if not
create) still lifes of fruit until at least 1883. But, in 1878, he also started making paintings of inanimate objects. He thus took the kinds of models that had been the focus of still-life studies and made them the very subject of his work.

In these paintings, however, Harnett aspired beyond mere imitation. As he introduced different types of objects into his work, the alternate approaches he took to depicting them—and to composition in particular—suggest he was examining how they themselves communicate and incorporating these strategies into painting. His paintings of Civil War relics explore the material and visual properties, respectively, that lent paper money and photographs (specifically cartes-de-visite) their cultural value. The money paintings exaggerate and exploit their subjects’ status as ink on paper, while *Attention, Company!* (fig. 12) manipulates its human subject’s dress, as had the organization that produced the photograph on which the painting is based. Like the literary realists, Harnett, in his tabletop still lifes, used text as a means to convey thought and other psychic operations. But whereas the realists did so with writing, he did so with objects, arranging legible and literary materials so as to evoke processes like writing and counting. Harnett’s specimen paintings incorporate...
I n t r o d u c t I o n

the display strategies that museums used to present everything from historical still-life paintings to man-made objects and to frame these objects as culturally significant. By hanging solitary animal corpses and defunct objects against vertical surfaces, the artist revealed the narratives inscribed within their respectively pristine and degraded bodies. To create his late works, Harnett borrowed and applied design strategies from the manufactures pictured within them. He arranged and rearranged unrelated models into elaborate tableaux whose evident artificiality indexed and announced the creative process through which they had been made. As he depicted these objects, then, Harnett redefined the practice and meaning of still life, imbuing the genre with a level of intellectual rigor and metaphysical significance that it was often seen to lack.

Harnett was not the only late nineteenth-century American artist to dedicate himself to still life and, more specifically, to still lifes of man-made things. Most notably, John F. Peto and John Haberle also pictured practical devices, printed materials, and tableware in their work. In paintings like Old Souvenirs (fig. 7), for example, Peto depicted various sorts of ephemera, including several types of cards and a photograph...
of his daughter Helen, tucked into a makeshift letter rack. The painting thus functions as a de facto self-portrait that forgoes physical likeness in order to convey something of the artist’s lived experiences as an artist and a father. Unlike Peto, who was interested in keepsakes and objects of personal significance to himself or others, Haberle’s interest was vested primarily, though not exclusively, in objects of exchange, including paper currency, playing cards, and chalkboards. Take, for instance, *The Slate* (fig. 8), which pictures an object one might have found in a grocery store in the 1890s. The eponymous object is coincident with the picture plane and littered with various sorts of marks: legible print directing the reader to “Leave Your Order Here”; a faded drawing of a cat; and a palimpsest whose most recent, legible addition reads, “For Rent / inquire of / John Haberle / New Haven, Ct.” Jennifer Greenhill has detailed the ways in which Haberle’s chosen texts and images straddled antiquated and emerging notions of humor at the turn of the century; they both evoke a narrative and rely upon a punch line. Like Harnett, then, Peto and Haberle were interested in the cultural significance of objects and used them to explore and even extend the boundaries of representation.

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**FIGURE 8**

Although museums and textbooks often acknowledge these artists’ interest in representation, they often still label their work “trompe l’oeil” and explain it as symptomatic of the era’s commodity culture. Many of the paintings by Haberle, Harnett, and Peto certainly exhibit the technique-cum-style’s characteristic traits—namely, a shallow depth of field and imperceptible (or strategically perceptible) brushwork. But the label “trompe l’oeil” has also been used to assert the artists’ presumed investment in illusionism and deception. By this count, like the commodities around them, their work toyed with viewers’ senses and psychological desires. While it helps locate paintings by Haberle, Harnett, and Peto in their historical moment, though, this label has obscured the artists’ investment in the genre of still life. Harnett’s work and career—and, in particular, his relatively sequential investigation of different types of objects—offer an incomparable lens through which to view the transformation and significance of the genre in the postwar era. Although unpopular among academicians, the genre maintained a presence in annual exhibitions throughout the nineteenth century. Yet these works, like Raphaelle Peale’s still lifes from early in the century, largely pictured fruits and flowers. Quintessential examples include Severin Roesen’s bountiful tabletop compositions, like Still Life with Fruit (1852, Smithsonian American Art Museum), and John La Farge’s careful studies of elegant blooms, either clipped or in situ, such as Wild Roses and Irises (1887, The Metropolitan Museum of Art). Harnett supplanted these natural subjects with man-made objects and, thereby, worked to position still life as a new form of history painting for the postwar era. Rather than picture figures in motion, the genre would represent metaphysical aspects of being at the very moment that American intellectuals were reconceptualizing the human condition in such terms.

But taking an even broader lens on Harnett’s work reveals the politics of this move. In addition to the resurgence of cultural and scholarly interest in the mind, the artist’s embrace of objects coincided with some of the most troubling developments of the postwar era. The final quarter of the nineteenth century witnessed the codification of state-sanctioned segregation; incursions into Native territories; and the Chinese Exclusion Act—to cite just a few discriminatory policies that Congress passed in this period. And yet none of these issues appears, either explicitly or implicitly, in Harnett’s work. I make this assertion not to blame the artist for failing to tackle these issues or for not being ahead of his time in his thinking on race and ethnicity, but to bring attention to the sociopolitical context in which he deployed objects as a means to represent the human condition. Toward the turn of the twenty-first century, art historians used the “Gilded Age” as a framework to discuss late nineteenth-century American art, thereby emphasizing its relationship to the economic boon that resulted from industrialization. Scholars like Sarah Burns and Kathleen Pyne, to cite just two pivotal thinkers on the period, explored the important ways in which artists, critics, and patrons either engaged or rejected the conditions of modern, urban life. These accounts have done much to explain the divergent ways in which American artists
responded to the rise of industry, but they also bracket the racial and ethnic conflicts that occasioned and attended it.

In the twenty-first century, scholars including Alan Braddock, Asma Naeem, and Hélène Valance have looked askance at this era and uncovered the subtle but insistent ways in which the politics of identity impacted the work of its most canonical artists. Challenging understandings of Eakins as a painter of mainstream America, Braddock considers the largely unacknowledged diversity of Eakins’s subjects and reads them—and, in particular, the artist’s technically and conceptually fraught depictions of them—in relation to premodern notions of race, culture, and ethnicity.51 In her revelatory study of turn-of-the-century American art, Naeem examines the ways in which artists pictured “sonic themes and events” in order to expand or contract the types of experiences, populations, and discourses that their work engaged. Whereas Winslow Homer and Thomas Eakins included or used technologies with mass appeal in their paintings, rendering them representative of and accessible to a broader public, Thomas Wilmer Dewing thematized quietude and listening and embraced the subdued tones that characterized “high culture” at the time.52 Valance takes up another motif that gained currency among painters of the Gilded Age: the nocturne. Although its practitioners—predominantly white, male artists—proclaimed that their interests in it were purely aesthetic, Valance explains how the nocturne served as a metaphor for all sorts of modern conditions with which mainstream America was struggling to reconcile itself, including technological incursions into nature, racial and ethnic tensions at home and abroad, and urbanization.53

These studies center the social politics of post–Civil War America and explore the ways in which figure painters grappled with them in their work. People of color, sound, and nightscapes enabled artists to address, if ambivalently at times, the shifting nature of the nation’s body politic. For Harnett, still life offered a refuge from these demands and a way to retain painting’s ostensible objectivity. He used objects and still life to frame and represent “humanity” as a universal condition. Rather than different populations’ lived experiences or the realities of postwar life, his paintings addressed topics like the mind, life, and death. In eliding the body, Harnett likely intended his work to be “apolitical” and, as such, representative of the body politic as a whole. He thus adopted and adapted a key tenet of history painting. In his Discourses, Sir Joshua Reynolds had declared that “there must be something either in the action, or in the object, in which men are universally concerned, and which powerfully strikes upon the publick sympathy.”54 The work would thus be legible to viewers, but it would also foster a shared public culture among them. Both PAFA and the National Academy of Design looked to the Royal Academy of Arts in London—of which Reynolds was the first president—as an institutional model and, if implicitly, characterized the function of painting in similar terms.55 That is, their curricula suggested that painting should address, define, and visualize the national character, as biased as the academy’s assessment of this quality necessarily was.
Prior to the Gilded Age, works like Trumbull’s *The Death of General Warren at the Battle of Bunker’s Hill, June 17, 1775* (fig. 9) and Bierstadt’s *The Rocky Mountains, Lander’s Peak* (fig. 10) served this function. Respectively, these paintings picture the death of an American patriot, which would be of interest to British and American audiences alike, and Shoshone peoples ceding access to the Rocky Mountains. Looking back at such works today, we of course recognize the extent to which these “universally relevant” images and pictorial traditions reaffirm mainstream (read: white) understandings of the nation. Both Trumbull and Bierstadt quite literally marginalized people of color, thereby revealing the Othering on which “public culture” rested. For much of the nineteenth century, depictions of the past and of nature served to create this circumscribed vision of the body politic. The eclecticism of late nineteenth-century American art reflects, in part, the desublimation of the nation’s racial and ethnic complexity and conflicts. In this era, unlike in the past, no one genre dominated the cultural sphere. For an academically trained artist like Harnett, this development may have signaled a rupture in the social order, and it certainly would have heralded a threat to serious painting itself.

In an effort to secure the medium’s status and relevance in the postwar world, Harnett turned to objects and to still life to achieve the universality on which painting’s authority had long rested. But read in relation to the visual and material culture of the
Civil War, Reconstruction, and their aftermath, his paintings emerge as political despite the artist’s intentions. The more Harnett worked to avoid difference, the more his paintings abetted the interests of the cultural and economic elite. His still lifes may not have engaged explicitly partisan subjects, but their ostensible neutrality is where their politics—and their power—rested. They did not work for or toward a cause so much as they stood as a bulwark against the forces of cultural and political change. Paintings like *The Death of General Warren at the Battle of Bunker’s Hill, June 17, 1775* and *The Rocky Mountains, Lander’s Peak* were explicit about their interests and allegiances, but Harnett’s still lifes were much more subtle in their claims. They pictured (and couched) traditional understandings of the body politic in a new vocabulary. As he worked to divest politics from painting, then, Harnett inscribed it in his works’ very form. Both the objects he depicted and the paintings in which they appear embody, and thus reveal, the mainstream values, terms, and ideals with which national reconciliation was achieved.

**HARNETT’S PERSPECTIVE**

A few words on method. We know disappointingly little about Harnett’s life. He was born in Clonakilty in County Cork on the southern tip of Ireland, likely in 1848. The following year, when Harnett was around one year old, his family immigrated to
Philadelphia, where he grew up working class. Harnett’s father was a craftsman—whether a saddlemaker or a shoemaker is unclear—and his mother was a seamstress, as were two of the artist’s three sisters. At the age of seventeen, he began supporting himself as a silver engraver. The following year, 1866, he registered for his first course—an antique class—at PAFA. A few years later, Harnett moved to New York, where he continued to do commercial work and take classes, now at the National Academy of Design. In 1876, presumably on the occasion of the Centennial Exhibition, he returned to Philadelphia and to his studies at PAFA and stayed there for four years, before going abroad in 1880. In Europe, most of his time was spent in Munich, but Harnett also visited London and Paris and exhibited work in all three cities. Upon his return to the United States in 1886, he moved to New York, where he died just six years later. This meager information hardly provides much insight into Harnett’s lived experiences, let alone his work, which may partly explain why scholars have not considered his artistic aspirations. There is so little to go on.

We do not have any notebooks or journals that Harnett may have kept, nor do we have any letters that he may have sent or received. The only primary documents about him comprise a sketchbook from his time as a silver engraver; a scrapbook kept by his friend and colleague William Blemly; the records of the FBI investigation into the artist’s work; the catalogue of Harnett’s estate sale; and a good number of reviews and critical assessments. To this list, I add his paintings, which serve as my chief primary documents and the basis of this account. Starting with the work rather than popular reactions to it enables us to decipher the cultural and political conditions that compelled Harnett to make vividly realistic still lifes of inanimate objects in general and of relics, legible texts, specimens, and manufactures in particular. To address this issue, I look to other contexts in which these objects circulated—namely, wartime visual culture, literary realism, museum display, and industrial design. As much as the academy shaped Harnett’s thinking about painting, these fields defined cultural understandings of the objects he chose to depict. Focusing on the artist’s choice of subjects and the ways in which his portrayal of them resonates with, and diverges from, other depictions and discussions of such objects at the time, I make claims about Harnett’s interest in still life and his professional imperatives. This account thus affords as much weight to visual and material (rather than verbal) evidence as did the artist himself. Through objects, Harnett worked to give form to seemingly ineffable aspects of the human condition. Placing his paintings into conversation with the broader image universe in which they participated, my readings seek to translate into words his unstated intentions for them and his aspirations for still life as a genre.

Although I attend to the full scope of Harnett’s output, I do not cover the artist’s entire oeuvre. Readers acquainted with his work will note, for example, the absence of the artist’s rack pictures and his several paintings titled *After the Hunt* (1883, Columbus Museum of Art; 1883, Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens; 1884, Butler Institute of American Art; 1885, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco).