

Art on U.S. Stamps:

William Harnett

by John F. Dunn

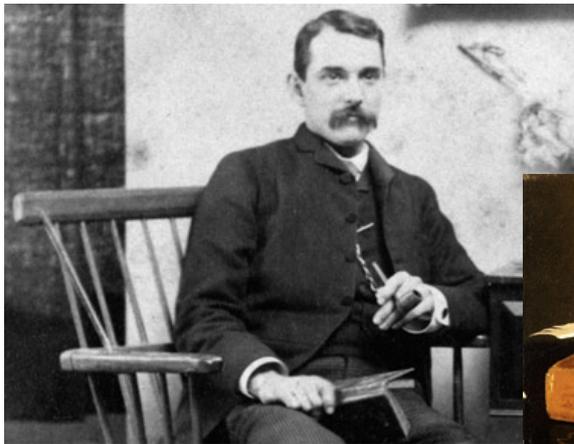
William Michael Harnett was born in Ireland in 1848 and was brought to Philadelphia as an infant. While training as a silver engraver, in 1866 he took evening classes at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts.

Moving to New York in 1869, he worked in an engraving shop there while also attending the Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art—and later the National Academy of Design. He returned to Philadelphia, and his studies at the Pennsylvania Academy, in 1876.

Even into the 1880s, he continued his studies, spending six years in Europe immersing himself in the old master still-life paintings. At that time he was influenced by the photography of Adolphe Braun.

Producing approximately 250 canvases in his brief career, he died at the age of just 44 in 1892. By then he was already a commercial success whose “trompe l’oeil” (fool the eye) artistic style caught on with the American public. *The Old Violin*, a still life created by

Keeping in mind that Harnett sometimes deliberately altered objects in his paintings, in *The Old Violin*, an envelope placed in the lower left appears to bear a France 1877 5 franc Peace and Commerce issue, Sc. 96. Addressed to New York, the cover bears a Registered (R) handstamp upper left and Due (T) handstamp upper right.



William Harnett, 1870

Harnett in 1886, fascinated viewers, who would reach out to feel the objects to see if they were real or painted.

An aspect of Harnett’s style that added to the realistic look of objects in his work was to



It is tough to tell, but in the *Banker's Table*, the cover addressed to New York City bears a 1¢ 1869 Pictorial, Sc. 113.

project one object forward in the viewer’s field of vision. In the *Banker's Table*, painted in 1877, this object was an envelope.

While the originals are now beyond reach for most of us, Harnett’s most famous works, including those shown here, have been posterized and are available from art and poster dealers. This also is most fitting since part of his popularity while still alive stemmed from the availability of his work in homes or business settings more often than they might be found in museums.

Indeed, some of his works were created for specific clients. One of them, painted in 1888 and shown here, is *Mr. Hulings' Rack Picture*, an oil on canvas work that reproduces business and personal correspondence of Philadelphia dry goods merchant George H. Hulings.

The cover torn open in the upper right appears to bear a 2¢ green 1887 Bank Note, Sc. 213.

Actually, Harnett is better known for his realistic reproductions of paper bills as well as coins. This is in part because



he reproduced them so realistically that he was arrested for counterfeiting in 1886, and stopped painting them at that time. The example seen here is *Still-Life Five Dollar Bill* and was painted in 1877.

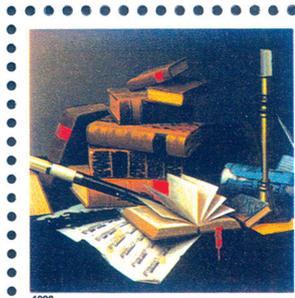


It is fitting that Harnett would incorporate philately into his work because many of his paintings are ideal for portrayal on 'the miniature works of art' that we know as stamps. The United States has issued two stamps that reproduce the paintings of William Harnett.

The first (Sc. 1386) pictures his last work, *Old Models*, an oil on canvas painted in 1892. It is shown here on a maximum card cancelled on its December 3, 1969 first day of issue in Boston.



The second Harnett issue is part of the 1998 Four Centuries of American Art pane of 20 different paintings (Sc. 3236).



1998
William Harnett (1848-1892) 32 USA

The Harnett stamp, Sc. 3236i, reproduces a portion of the oil on canvas, *Music and Literature*, which Harnett painted in 1878. The stamp and the full painting are reproduced here.

(Note: that stamp as well as the other 19 in this issue are featured on our own set of Art Pages, the first in a series of Art on



Stamps pages we will be producing; see the adjacent column for details on the Four Centuries of American Art pages. JFD.)