

Basic Detail Report



Title: Time and Eternity

Basic Detail Report

Date: c. 1889-90

Primary Maker: com.gallerysystems.emuseum.core.entities.RecordXPerson@2859a

Medium: Oil on canvas

Description: While all of Haberle's contemporaries in still-life painting were concerned with illusionism, Haberle was the only one who consistently dealt with two-dimensional trompe l'oeil. He typically avoided deep space by arranging his objects against a flat board, as in "Time and Eternity". His newspaper clippings are always entirely legible, and his stamps, currency, pawn tickets, and other receipts repeatedly fooled the general public, as well as artists and critics, with their exact lettering and intricate curlicued border decorations. Most convincing perhaps was Haberle's method of producing a slight relief on the surface of a canvas by stacking layers of paint in imitation of the layers of paper they depicted. Even Haberle's signature in "Time and Eternity" succeeds in fooling the trained eye: is it scratched into the board, incised into the paint layer, or applied on top of the paint? Haberle painted a number of works featuring objects hanging from or attached to a flat board, yet "Time and Eternity" is perhaps one of the artist's most complex and successful productions in this style. Several items like the playing cards, the orange theater ticket, and the pink pawn ticket for someone named Isaac, appear in "A Bachelor's Drawer" (1890-94; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) and in "Conglomeration" (1889; whereabouts unknown). In the New Britain picture they are juxtaposed with a primitive wooden rosary, an old watch, a photo of a young girl that came in cigarette packages of the day, and a newspaper clipping referring to the infamous American lecturer Robert Green Ingersoll (1833-1899). Headlined "Time and Eternity and Bob Ingersoll", the fragmentary clipping reads: In the county jail . . . awaiting trial. As Gertrude Sill noted, the dateline, "Providence, July 4", amusingly puns on the prisoner's loss of freedom on Independence Day and on the "obvious religious meaning" of the city's name.(1) Ingersoll, a prominent lawyer and self-proclaimed agnostic, received as much as \$3,500 for his lectures on such wide-ranging subjects as education, slavery, and the Bible. His views on religious matters were widely published and often engaged him in heated controversy. In 1880 and 1895 irate citizens tried to convict him of blasphemy; he was acquitted both times.(2) "Time and Eternity" does not comment on Ingersoll alone but also on the apparent oppositions of science and religion, the physical and the metaphysical. The timepiece, a traditional symbol of vanitas, and the various bits of detritus of daily life are juxtaposed with the rosary in an obvious contrast between the temporal and the spiritual, the profane and the sacred. In many of his works Haberle's torn, ragged scraps of paper currency refer to the passage of time; here the small scrap to the right of the photograph reads "GRAVE" (part of the word engraved, a blatant reference to death, emphasized by the scrap's proximity to the crucifix. The headline of the newspaper clipping may have been derived from "Growing Older," a popular poem by Rollin John Wells that addresses the shift away from a preoccupation with material things toward a more humanitarian outlook that takes place as one

Basic Detail Report

advances in years.(2) The words awaiting trial may suggest the irate citizens' attempts to imprison Ingersoll; combined with the word Providence they also refer to the Last Judgment, which will separate the righteous from the evildoers. Christians may have viewed Ingersoll--"Injuresoul," as he was nicknamed--as gambling with his soul and with the souls of his followers. Accordingly, several items in Haberle's conglomeration are symbols of gambling: the king and the nine of hearts suggest a hand in blackjack or twenty-one; Isaac's pawn ticket, which eschewed responsibility "for loss or dam[age]. . . moth or burglar[y]"; a card with a lucky seven prominently displayed; and bits of paper money. Even the rosary symbolizes a sort of gambling--religious prayer. Thus Haberle provides a twist on traditional vanitas still lifes with his witty and irreverent--if labyrinthine--glimpse into late-nineteenth-century popular culture.(4) MAS BIBLIOGRAPHY: Alfred Frankenstein, "After the Hunt: William Harnett and Other American Still Life Painters", rev. ed. (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1969), pp. 115-22; Gertrude Grace Sill, "John Haberle: Master of Illusion", exhib. cat. (Springfield, Mass.: Museum of Fine Arts, 1985). NOTES: 1. Sill, "John Haberle", p. 16. 2. On Ingersoll, see C. H. Cramer, "Royal Bob: The Life of Robert Green Ingersoll" (New York: Bobbs Merrill), 1952. 3. The first stanza reads: "A little more tired at the close of day, / A little more anxious to have our way, / A little less ready to scold and blame, / A little more care for a brother's name; / And so we are nearing the journey's end, / Where time and eternity meet and blend" (Rollin John Wells, "Pleasure and Pain" (New York: Broadway Publishing, 1913). "Growing Older" is included in Hazel Felleman, ed. "The Best Loved Poems of the American People" (New York: Doubleday, 1936), pp. 608-9, though the poet is recorded as R. G. Wells. On Wells (b. 1848), see William Stewart Wallace, "Dictionary of North American Authors Deceased After 1950" (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1951), p. 495. 4. With its juxtaposition of a timepiece and a wad of money, Haberle's "Time and Eternity" bears some resemblance to Ferdinand Danton Jr.'s "Time is Money" (1894; Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Conn.). Danton's picture is not a vanitas piece but has been interpreted as a comment on both Benjamin Franklin's homespun wisdom and on the increased regimentation of workers in an industrial society (see Edward J. Nygren, "The Almighty Dollar: Money as a Theme in American Painting," "Winterthur Portfolio" 23 (summer/autumn, 1988), p. 140). Yet the basic composition and many of the trompe-l'oeil devices are similar enough to suggest that Haberle's picture might have inspired Danton's. Dimensions: 14 x 10 in. (24 x 20 x 3 in.)