

My Gems

by William Harnett

Print Facts

- Medium: Oil on wood
- Date: 1888
- Size: 18 X 14 inches
- Location: National Gallery of Art, Washington
- Genre: Still life
- William moved away from doing feminine still lifes (fruit and flowers) to more masculine objects like in this painting.
- His dark pallet was also considered masculine.
- Harnett preferred to use objects that were worn and old because they showed history and individuality.

Artist Facts

- Born August 10, 1848
- Died October 29, 1892
- He was born in Clonakilty, Ireland during the great potato famine.
- Not long after his birth his family immigrated to Philadelphia.
- As a young man he made a living tracing designs on silverware.
- Art critics did not accept Harnett because they thought his art was machine like, but he was very popular with the public.
- His paintings were not likely to be found in museums or galleries, but rather saloons, department stores and hotels.
- He suffered from rheumatism in his old age reducing the number of paintings he could accomplish.
- His style was known as trompe l'oeil (pronounced tromp lay), which literally means "to fool the eye". His objects looked so realistic that one could almost mistake the painting for the objects themselves.
- Harnett was once arrested for counterfeiting because of a painting he did of a five-dollar bill.
- Sometimes viewers would reach out to see if an object was real or painted.
- Harnett wanted all his paintings to tell a story.
- His father was a shoemaker and his mother a seamstress.
- His father drowned in the Delaware River when William was a teenager.

Key Element of Design to Teach

- **Balance**, often referred to as visual weight, describes the relationships between different elements of a work of art in terms of their size and location. The balance of an artwork can be used to help create a visual harmony or tension within the piece. In

art “nothing” can balance “something.” Balance is achieved by arranging art elements in the artwork so that no one part overpowers, or seems heavier than, any other part. Symmetry and asymmetry are part of balance. Symmetry is the relationship of one or more groups of elements so that they are identical from side to side. Asymmetry is a part of balance where the elements are evenly weighted visually, but they are not the same.

Possible Questions to Teach Balance

- How does the white object balance all the dark objects?
- How does the pattern on the white jug help balance the collection of dark objects?
- Would you say this painting is balanced? Talk about balance. Explain that with a boat or a teeter-totter you have to have equal weight on both sides or it is not balanced. Painting is the same. The visual weight has to be equal for it to be balanced.
- Have a couple of students set up their own version of this painting using a tablecloth, fruit, bowls and books on a table in front of the class.

Keywords

- Still-life, color, line

Other Possible Questions

- What objects do you see in this painting?
- Would you consider this painting masculine or feminine?
- Would you say this is a dark or a light painting? Where do you see light in the painting?
- This painting is a still life. What do you think a still life is?
- Teaching Idea: Bring a collection of random objects and see if students can arrange them so everything is balanced, or have students arrange the items how they would like to paint them if they were artists.
- What could these objects tell us about the person who owned them?
- If you created a still life with your favorite things, what objects would you chose? Fruits, flowers, books, candles, dishes?