

## Part 13

# Horology *in* Art

By Bob Frishman (MA)

Once before in this series, I have presented work by a living artist, Jamie Wyeth. Ken Davies is now another, an American master of realist painting whom I had the privilege of recently visiting at his home and atelier in Madison, CT. Born in New Bedford, MA, in 1925, he has painted, exhibited, studied, and taught art his entire adult life, and his work includes many fine examples of *trompe l'oeil* paintings such as *The Sword* shown here.

Translated as “eye-deceiver” from the French, this style is painted so skillfully, with detail, perspective, and shadowing, that it appears to mimic reality. It evolved in Europe where exact representation and technical ability were at first admired but later became disparaged as artistic academies sought to elevate artists from simple craftsmen to creative intellectuals with higher “truths” to portray. Earlier generations of American artists also faced this criticism; some, including John Haberle, William Harnett, and John Peto, excelled at *trompe l'oeil* but did not achieve the greater fame of their more “artistic” colleagues. Haberle’s *Clock* is in my collection of digital images and is so realistic that Alfred Frankenstein, a pioneering scholar of *trompe l'oeil*, passed it several times at the artist’s home before realizing that it was not a real OG shelf clock.

In his retrospective book, *Ken Davies, American Realist*, published in 2009, Davies recounts his visit as a young man to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, his first visit ever to an art museum, before he began classes at the Massachusetts School of Art. He was amazed by a Dutch flower painting, which was so realistic that he worried a leaking ceiling had left a drop of water on the painting, a drop painted there centuries ago. He then viewed Harnett’s *Old Models*, again astounded by lifelike flies, bugs, and water droplets. He was hooked by a grand artistic tradition that is far more than photographic.

He continued his studies at the Yale Art School, where he determined to be a realist painter, mostly of sharp-focus still-life work, and where his B.F.A. thesis was written on the history of *trompe l'oeil* painting. His work is owned by important collectors and several prominent museums.

In his book he tells a story of *The Sword*, which he completed shortly before graduating. He had left some of the depicted objects in his cubicle when he departed, and they were seen by Joseph Albers, the abstract artist who was just arriving as the department’s new chair. Albers asked if the stuff’s owner was still there, and when told no, said “Then get rid of them.” Davies was grateful not to have had Albers over him and tells how the painting soon was sold to the Detroit Institute of Art.

Fortunately for my project, realist art continues to be



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

created and collected, and its best practitioners can stand alongside popular contemporary artists producing more abstract and impressionist canvasses. Several of the hundreds of art students taught by Ken Davies are among today’s successful realists. I hope to include paintings by other living artists in future installments.

I did not ask Ken Davies if the pocket watch and hourglass in this painting were among the objects discarded at Yale. While neither timekeeper has great horological importance, they are preserved here in a way in which we are tempted to lift them off the canvas for closer examination.

### About the Author

Bob Frishman has repaired, restored, collected, sold, and researched antique timekeepers since 1980. His business, Bell-Time Clocks, is based in Andover, MA. He was head of publicity for the recent Time For Everyone symposium where he presented his “Clocks on Canvas” program during the add-on day in Santa Barbara. He has authored many articles for the *Watch & Clock Bulletin* and can be reached via [www.bell-time.com](http://www.bell-time.com).