

DESIDERATUM

Catalan painter Pere Borrell del Caso's remarkable *Escaping Criticism* was more likely a masterclass in the art of illusion than an ideological statement, says historian Francesc Fontbona de Vallescar



What is this painting?

Escaping Criticism (previous page) is an exceptional example of nineteenth-century trompe l'oeil painting. The central figure of the boy clambering out of the frame – and apparently invading the spectator's space – is an illusion created by the absolutely perfect technique of realism. The artist, Pere Borrell del Caso, wanted to depict something that would surprise the viewer with its precision. Almost a century after his death, this painting was chosen to promote the exhibition *Deceptions and Illusions: Five Centuries of Trompe l'Oeil Painting* at Washington, D.C.'s National Gallery of Art in 2002. The image of the boy escaping from the frame certainly made an impression on the spectators.

What exactly is trompe l'oeil?

Trompe l'oeil (from the French, meaning “deceives the eye”) is a device used by artists to create the illusion of three-dimensional objects. In painting, it involves a heightened command of pictorial techniques: the ability to achieve the right color, perspective, relief, shadow, etc., so that the depicted object looks real.

Although this practice flourished particularly from the Renaissance onward it actually originated in the classical period. The first examples were seen in ancient Greece in the work of the artist Zeuxis, who is said to have painted such lifelike bunches of grapes that sparrows would swoop down to peck them.

Who was Pere Borrell del Caso?

Borrell (1835–1910) was a painter from Puigcerdà, in Catalonia, trained in purism, a variant of romanticism that dominated the Catalan art scene of the day and was a totally idealistic style. Borrell, though, preferred to paint according to reality.

He became so well known for his style of marked realism that he attracted a following and preached like an apostle to his disciples. Despite being offered a teaching post at Barcelona's prestigious School of Fine Arts, he chose to set up a private academy



In Pere Borrell del Caso's painting *Two girls laughing* (1880), on display at Barcelona's Museu del Modernisme Català, one of the young subjects appears to be leaning out of the

painting, toward the spectator. The illusion has been masterfully created by incorporating the frame's gold-leaf ornamentation into the painting itself

in the city and went on to train several generations of prominent Catalan artists.

What were his intentions with this work?

There's no real evidence to suggest an ideological message behind this painting, Borrell merely set out to amaze the spectator with the realism of the piece. The title, *Escaping Criticism*, was added later by someone who had no connection with the artist. This title may have first appeared in the 1905 illustrated journal *Àlbum Saló*n while the artist was still alive but no longer working. In the inventory that Borrell kept of his paintings, he calls it *Boy stepping out of the picture*, the same name he gave the second version he produced two years later.

The name is appropriate, though. During his old age, the artist may have felt wary of some critics. With the arrival of modernism in Spain and elsewhere, several now considered his style to be a little old-fashioned.

How was it received at the time?

It didn't make a great splash when Borrell first painted it. The big successes then were large-scale historical scenes that had won prizes at official fine art exhibitions (which he attended infrequently). Borrell made a living from medium-sized commissions –

portraits, scenes from everyday life, some landscapes, religious themes – and from private tuition. He was the complete antithesis of a celebrity painter. At this point in the nineteenth century, trompe l'oeil was not particularly popular. It was seen as a random display of virtuosity rather than an ongoing specialty, a style more characteristic of past periods such as the Renaissance or baroque eras, something occasionally used in murals.

Who owns *Escaping Criticism* today, and what is its approximate value?

It belongs to the Bank of Spain; its market value is difficult to ascertain as Borrell's other, less iconic work cannot serve as a benchmark. Because of its legendary status its value would not be below US\$250,000, although it could easily reach a much higher price at auction. The possibility of it being put under the hammer, though, is remote.

How does the rest of Borrell's work compare?

Borrell liked to play with this technique; in fact there are three more versions of this work. The best, however, is certainly the one at the Bank of Spain – the first, painted in 1874. While all of his work followed the principles of realism, only a few feature trompe l'oeil. Barcelona's Museu del Modernisme Català, for example, houses a painting of two girls [above] who also appear to emerge from the frame. Around 15 of the more than three hundred paintings catalogued for Borrell feature trompe l'oeil taken to this extreme.

How collectible is trompe l'oeil from this era?

In the U.S. there was a strong tradition of trompe l'oeil in the nineteenth century, with painters specializing in still lifes. A work by William Harnett (1848–1892) was the top seller at a 2010 auction (US\$552,000); paintings by John F. Peto and John Haberle are particularly popular with collectors.✦

Translated by Kim Eddy

Francesc Fontbona de Vallescar, historian, art critic, and expert in Catalan Modernism, was in conversation with Marisa Julian

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