

Historic Precedent

Magic Glasses, 1891

Edwin Romanzo Elmer (1850-1923)

Oil on canvas

The curators of *American Realism and Magic Realism* recognized that the trend in American painting that they were acknowledging in 1943 had deep historic roots. In his introduction to the catalog for that exhibition, Lincoln Kirstein noted "The painters represented here. . . create images of instantaneous recognition. By a combination of crisp hard edges, tightly indicated forms and the counterfeiting of material surfaces. . . our eyes are deceived into believing in the reality of what is rendered, whether factual or imaginary." This seems remarkably close to a definition of a trend popular in still life painting during the second half of the nineteenth century known as "*trompe l'oeil*" or "fool the eyes."

Edwin Romanzo Elmer was a little-known painter based out of Ashfield, Massachusetts, just south of Vermont. He created a handful of highly innovative paintings, including this, his only known still life. Elmer meticulously captured the hard, cold, reflective surfaces of the marble table top, glass, and metal. The depiction of the magnifying glass, with its distorted reflections of a landscape outside, seen through a window, brings up questions of perception and the limits of human sight, topics that are explored by many Magic Realists.

Can you find William Reynold's *trompe l'oeil* still lifes in the nearby Gilded Age Gallery? They combine humor, double meanings, and painted elements that seem to burst forth into our three-dimensional realm.

Collection of Shelburne Museum, Museum purchase, acquired from Richard Gipson, 1960