



A Deception by Samuel Lewis is full of visual clues – but what was the coded messages embedded by the artist?

# A TRICK ON THE EYE

The objects shown in an 18th-century painting were clues to a long-forgotten tragedy. JULIE FLAVELL unlocks the hidden meaning behind *A Deception*

**T**HE DISCOVERY of an 18th-century still life painting in a second-hand stall in London two years ago caused excitement among early American art specialists. The painting, called *A Deception*, was by Samuel Lewis, one of the most famous cartographers of the early American Republic. It is only the second surviving trompe l'oeil by English-born Lewis ever to be found.

It was the story behind *A Deception* that brought me into the case. The objects in it had been put there for a reason. Working out the connection between them would unlock the code to the picture's hidden message. As a historian, I was called in to help decipher them. Delving into the picture's secrets was to take me on a journey that led outside the realm of art history, to the underworld of Georgian London, a crime, and a tragic tale that had remained buried in the painting for two centuries.

The painting was discovered at an antiques fair at the Duke of York's Headquarters in London. Stuck in a plain pine frame, it was propped up against an old dresser. The Devonshire furniture dealers who ran the stall thought it was a print. But fine art specialist James Mitchell of John Mitchell Fine Paintings, who spotted it, suspected that it was not. Mitchell bought it and to his delight found it was an original by Samuel Lewis.

*A Deception* is a special type of trompe l'oeil that was common in Georgian England, known as a medley painting. Medleys always had more to them than met the eye. The objects in the picture looked as if they

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## UNLOCKING A DECEPTION: CLUES TO A MYSTERY

- 1 Samuel Lewis's business card: "Young Ladies Taught Writing and Drawing at their own Houses". In the upper left quarter of the picture are objects that exhibit Samuel's credentials: *The Ladies Pocket Book*, a sample book of cursive writing labelled "Running Hand Copies", and a pen-and-ink drawing.
- 2 *The Lloyd's Evening Post* of London, 25 December, 1778. Its front-page story relates to the Carlisle Commission, a last-ditch effort by the British government to end the American Revolution by offering home rule to the colonies. The Commission was a failure, and the war dragged on for another five years.
- 3 *The Distrest Mother*, written in 1712 by English playwright Ambrose Philips. The script seen here is a reprint dated 1778. The play's title probably has a double meaning: the distress of England, the mother country, at the American rebellion, and the distress of Mrs Lewis at the tragedy that befell her son William.
- 4 Tickets to *The West-Indian*, a smash hit that made its first appearance on the London stage in 1771. Its author was Richard Cumberland, who was working at the British Government's Board of Trade in 1774. He replaced John Pownall as secretary when the latter retired in 1776.
- 5 Jacob Roberts's name appears four times. His business card and two envelopes bearing his name and address at 55 Chandos Street, Covent Garden are arranged at the bottom of the picture. The tickets to *The West-Indian* announce that it is "Mr Roberts' Benefit". Roberts's choice of Cumberland's play for his fundraising event is probably a coincidence, but Lewis uses it as a clue that the two men are associated with one another in the context of the picture.
- 6 The promissory note that is the clue to the crime behind the picture. The date on it, 1779, is the latest in the picture, suggesting the year that *A Deception* was painted.



were thrown together at random. Actually, they were chosen very deliberately, and they were intended to be a puzzle. The challenge for the observer was to decipher the relationship between the objects. Work out the links between them, and you will discover the picture's meaning. So what message was Lewis trying to get across? On the face of it, Lewis's painting is simply an advertisement. London's draftsmen and printers used medleys to show off their skill, identifying themselves by inserting their business card somewhere in the picture. Hence Lewis's calling card in the centre, and above it his business card.

### The mysterious Mr Roberts

But why were the other objects there? What hidden message was embedded in them? Beginning with James Mitchell, *A Deception* passed through the hands of art experts in London, Philadelphia, and New York. The consensus that emerged was that the picture had a political meaning.

It can be dated to around 1780, when the British were losing the American War of Independence. Four objects in the painting seem to express regret at the American rejection of a British offer of reconciliation. The newspaper on the lower right-hand side of the painting tells of the Carlisle Commission, a committee appointed by the British government in 1778 to make peace with the Americans. Just above it are tickets to a play written by Richard Cumberland, a civil servant who supported the Carlisle Commission. Opposite the newspaper on the left, a play, *The Distrest Mother*, hints at disappointment in the mother country when the Commission was rejected. Tucked underneath the play is an invitation to an anniversary dinner for the

Asylum for Female Orphans in Westminster. This charity was patronised by Lord North, the Prime Minister who initiated the Carlisle Commission. In the painting, the allusion to North's charitable work serves further to associate the British government with the theme of family separation and tragedy.

But here the political trail ran dry. Nothing else in the picture could be connected to the war in America. And a mysterious name recurs – a Mr Jacob Roberts of 55 Chandos Street, Covent Garden. Clearly Jacob Roberts was an important figure. Finding his identity could be the key to the whole mystery. It was Bruce Weber, the director of research and exhibitions at Berry-Hill Galleries in New York, who contacted me about *A Deception*. My research project on London when it was the capital city of

America has given me an expertise on people who had transatlantic careers, as Samuel Lewis did. Could I identify Roberts? Did I know anything about Lewis himself?

The obvious place to start was the correspondence of Benjamin Franklin. He had lived in London between 1757 and 1775, acting as a colony agent. But even when living in the fashionable centre of empire, he was still a printer who knew printers, and kept up his contacts. He was the sort of man a cartographer would know. My database of Franklin's London contacts drew a blank. Nevertheless, Georgian London was a small place, and Franklin's name would come up again, in an unexpected quarter.

The thing that bothered me about *A Deception* was the promissory note at its centre. It is folded in half, but its formulaic words. "I Promise to pay on Demand", can still be made out. Why was it there? Was there a money problem buried in the picture somewhere – or a crime? I felt certain that this picture was about a crime. And it was that hunch that led me to the proceedings of London's famous Old Bailey. Sure enough, Jacob Roberts of Chandos Street was there, in a trial

Pownall, victim of "the deception", was a friend of Benjamin Franklin (below)



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Enigmatic references to politics, his own career and the fate of his brother may be decoded in Lewis's painting

England, just shoplifting a pair of shoes could get the death penalty. What could have tempted him to take such a risk? My guess is that he had lost money gambling. That would explain the two playing cards in the picture, the king of diamonds, and the king of clubs just behind the tickets to *The West-Indian*.

Diamonds and clubs. Perhaps William was gambling in one of London's numerous clubs and lost disastrously. If so, and he turned to crime to clear his debt, he would have had plenty of company. Henry Fielding, author of *Tom Jones* and a gifted commentator on the London of his day, blamed gambling for a whole generation of criminals, including the epidemic of highwaymen that were the scourge of England's roads. In the days when credit was almost impossible to obtain, serious gambling debts could lead a man to take desperate measures.

#### A young man of good character

William's trial took place on 19 October. The two bank clerks testified against him. In his defence, six character witnesses were produced, each of whom swore that he was "a sober young man". One of them was his landlord, Jacob Roberts. William and his mother had lodged at Mr Roberts's house in Chandos Street for a year and a half. Mr Roberts assured the court that William was "a young man of good character". He was not from the ranks of the criminal classes.

Georgian trials were short, even for capital crimes. Witnesses were not closely examined; forensic evidence was scarce. The accused did not have much time to prove their innocence. Producing character witnesses could be crucial in persuading the judge to be lenient. But the friends of William Lewis who watched his trial at the Old Bailey knew that he was doomed. Knowing this, they had already tried to help him to escape. ➤

dated 19 October 1774. Roberts was a character witness for a young man named William Lewis – Samuel's brother. William was on trial for his life. The crime: forgery, an offence that was sometimes known as "deception" in the law books of Georgian England.

The story behind the picture now came vividly to life in the pages of the old court proceedings. On 8 September 1774, a young man entered Drummond's Bank in Charing Cross. He presented a draft instructing the bank to "pay the bearer £15 and place it to the account of J Pownall". The J Pownall in this case was no less than John Pownall, an important civil servant at the Board of Trade and a friend of Benjamin Franklin.

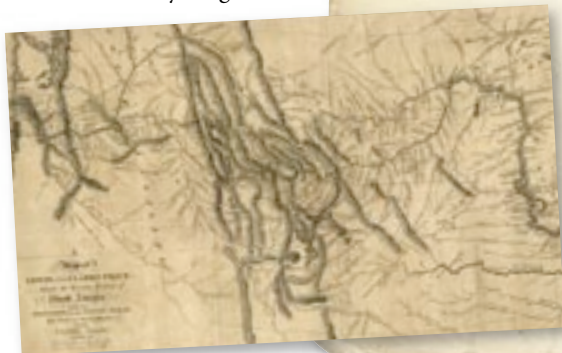
The bank clerk, George Wheatley, was suspicious. Mr Pownall was a well-known customer. The handwriting on the draft did not look quite right. When the young man was asked to sign the draft, he wrote "Thomas Smith". Wheatley showed the draft to another clerk, who pointed out that Mr Pownall normally signed his full name, rather than his initial. By this time, "Thomas Smith" had left the bank with the £15. Two days later, no doubt flushed with success, he tried the same trick again. This time the clerks were ready for him, and he was arrested. His real name was William Lewis. Like his younger brother Samuel, he had worked as a draftsman at the Board of Trade. He knew Mr Pownall and where he banked, and he thought he could copy his superior's handwriting.

William Lewis was in very deep trouble. In Georgian

### SAMUEL LEWIS: THE MAN BEHIND THE PAINTING

Samuel Lewis is a well-known American cartographer, but his early life has been shrouded in obscurity. He was born in England in 1753 or 1754. Records from art exhibitions reveal that he was working as a draftsman at the Board of Trade and living at 55 Chandos Street in 1774. He later worked as a writing and drawing master in Ashford, Kent. Not until the discovery of *A Deception* in 2005 was anything more known of his family or his past.

Lewis emigrated to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in the early 1790s. It was there that he began his highly successful American career as a map-maker and painter of deceptions. His most famous work was the map of Lewis and Clark's track (1814), a reworking of the original maps drawn by Meriwether Lewis and William Clark on the first ever United States expedition to the Pacific coast (1804–06). A friend of the gifted Charles Willson Peale family, Lewis pioneered the art of trompe l'oeil painting in America, inspiring notable American artists such as William Michael Harnett. By the time of his death in 1822, he was married with children and grandchildren.



Samuel's map of the journey of Meriwether Lewis and William Clark



## TROMPE L'OEIL: A DECEPTION IN PAINT

Trompe l'oeil – meaning “trick the eye” – is a genre of still-life painting that uses extreme realism to fool the observer into mistaking art for reality. It can take many forms. In Georgian England, “medleys” were popular. These were trompe l'oeils of an assortment of overlapping everyday objects scattered across a surface. The English called them “deceptions”. Usually they were paper objects such as letters, cards, pamphlets, and pictures. Lewis's is a type of medley known as a rack painting, where papers seem to be arranged in an old-fashioned letter rack criss-crossed by straps.



Gianlisì's c 1710 painting of objects that tell a story also includes a trompe l'oeil curtain

Some time before the trial, six people tried to smuggle a disguise and a saw to William in prison. They were caught in the act and arrested. They themselves were on trial at the Old Bailey on the very same day as William, charged with abetting an escape attempt. Samuel Lewis was one of the six in court that day. Was the escape his idea? Had he rigged up the mask and costume himself, trying through a second deception to save his brother from the results of the first? Luckily for Samuel and his accomplices, their case was dismissed for lack of evidence. William was not so fortunate. He was sentenced to be hanged at Tyburn on 30 November.

Execution days in Georgian London were holidays, because the authorities believed public hangings deterred crime. The whole grim affair had the air of a carnival. The condemned were driven through the streets in open carts, closely watched by a ghoulish crowd. Street vendors went back and forth selling gingerbread and oranges, and the heartless multitude openly enjoyed itself. At the scaffold, “celebrity” criminals like the highwayman Jack Sheppard put on a show for the crowd, dressing in their finest and dying with panache.

### The devil-may-care highwayman

William had been condemned at the Old Bailey on the same day as “Sixteen String” Jack Rann, a well-known highwayman who affected the genteel devil-may-care manner so adored by the crowd. He was named for the 16 decorative strings he tied at the knees of his breeches.

## The tragedy that overtook Samuel's brother remained a secret

On the execution day Rann was the centre of attention, turning out in his best clothes, his characteristic ribbons at his knees and a nosegay in his buttonhole. Everyone strained to see if he would die with the cavalier indifference that made him a hero in the eyes of the mob.

One hopes that the distracting presence of “Sixteen String” Jack gave the Lewises a little privacy in the midst of their ordeal. For there was no doubt that his family and friends came to William's hanging. Loved ones came to hangings to be the only kind faces the condemned would see in their last moments. Did William see his brother, his mother, and the friends who had tried to save him as he looked out from the gallows over Hyde Park? They would be his last sight in this world.

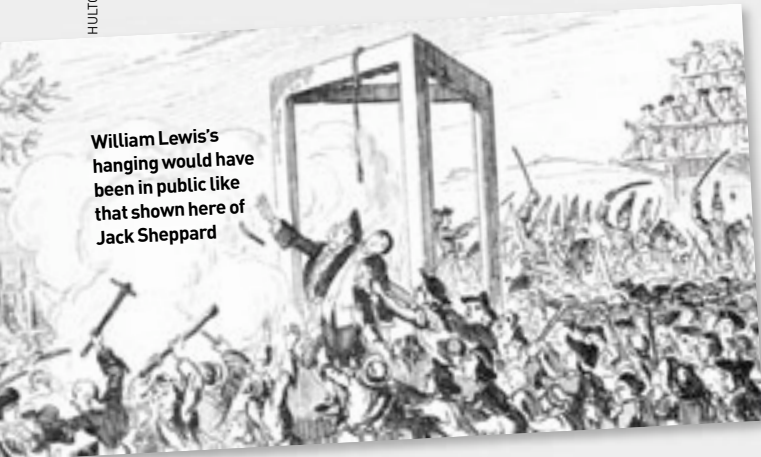
For young Samuel Lewis, most of life still lay ahead. A few years after William's death he was setting up as a writing master in Southwark. The likelihood is that *A Deception* was commissioned by friends as a leg-up for him at the start of his new business. These were friends who knew of the tragedy – Jacob Roberts, Richard Cumberland, perhaps even John Pownall. Although Pownall was the victim of William's forgery, he had not testified against the youth. Indeed, he was conspicuous for his absence at the trial. Drummond's Bank had deliberately given William money from its own funds, thereby ensuring that it, rather than a soft-hearted employer, was the wronged party.

We do not know how Samuel fared with his writing-school. But we do know that he eventually left England to pursue his career in the USA. There he produced scores of elegant maps – and deceptions. Almost none survive, but exhibition catalogues testify to his life-long preoccupation with this genre. *A Deception* by Mr Lewis, read the catalogues over and over, another of Mr Lewis's many deceptions, exhibited alongside of his maps. His forays into trompe l'oeil paintings seem like a side show in his American career.

But the picture reveals that deceptions were at the very core of Samuel's life. The tragedy that overtook his brother – a tragedy that took the form of many deceptions, of forgery, of attempted escape, and finally of art – remained a secret that Samuel Lewis kept when he crossed the Atlantic. Perhaps its legacy was the lifelong fascination with genuine versus counterfeit that he expressed in his paintings. **LI**

HULTON ARCHIVE-GETTY IMAGES

William Lewis's hanging would have been in public like that shown here of Jack Sheppard



## JOURNEYS

### WEBSITE

The trials of William and Samuel can be viewed at Old Bailey Proceedings Online ([www.oldbaileyonline.org](http://www.oldbaileyonline.org)) by searching on the following reference numbers: **t17741019-28** and **t17741019-75**