

Samuel Lewis (1753/4 – 1822)

A Deception

watercolour and ink on paper

14 ¼ x 19½ in. (36 x 49.5 cm.)

signed Mrs Lewis right side and dated 1787 top left

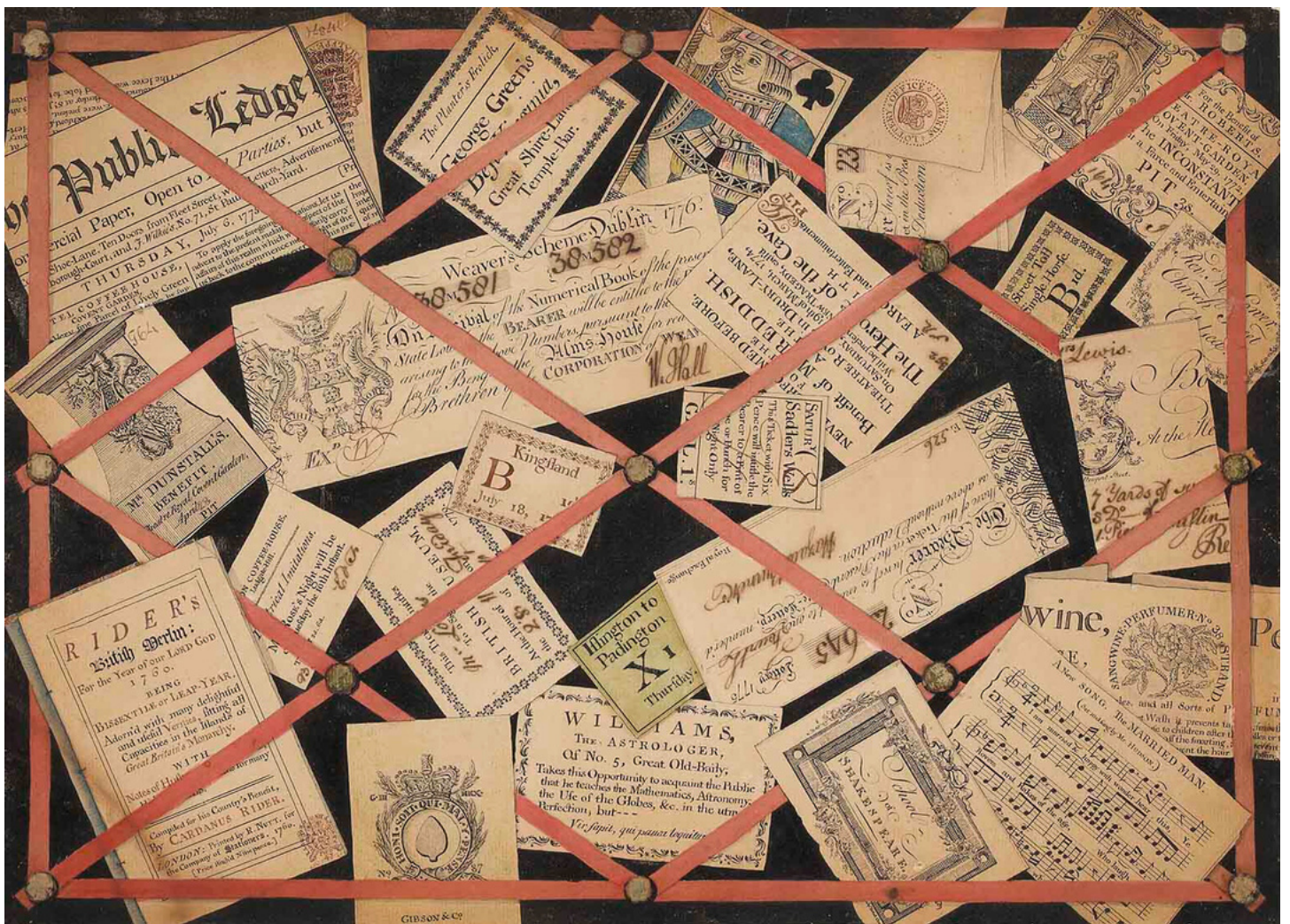




Fig 1, *A Deception*, Samuel Lewis, with John Mitchell Fine Paintings 2005.

That *Deception* was bought by an American collector and is now in the collection of the National Gallery of Art, Washington DC (accession no. 2008.28.1). For such a fascinating and rare artist, it was hoped that there were yet other pictures to be discovered. Now, happily, seventeen years on a third *Deception* by Lewis has emerged. Immediately comparable in style and size to the Washington example, it follows the same criss-cross pattern of ribbons across a board, with cards tucked behind them and overlapping one another. As in the two others the artist has subtly included his signature on the right side of the painting, disguised as a receipt for his wife or mother (reads *Mrs Lewis*). A seemingly random variety of papers cover the picture, including coach, lottery and theatre tickets, playing cards, sheet music, advertisements, a copy of *The Public Ledger* and the 1760 edition of *Rider's British Merlin*. The deliberate inclusion of words such as 'imitations' and 'verities' on some of the papers emphasize the picture's device as a visual deception. Lewis displays his masterful ability to mimic different type faces and calligraphic styles, while furthering the illusion by contrasting them with his own handwriting done in gall ink that has bled into the paper.



Fig 3, *Trompe l'oeil letter rack*, 1665, Cornelius Gysbrechts, Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris

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Fig 4, *Lewis and Clark's track across the western portion of North America*, Samuel Lewis, Library of Catalogues, Washington DC

Aside from the surface visual illusion and wordplay, is there a deeper puzzle to be solved? In 2007 the historian Julie Flavell published an article entitled *A Trick on the Eye* for the *BBC History* magazine, and revealed that the *Washington Deception* did indeed have a deeper narrative. She discovered that Lewis' brother William had been on trial for bank fraud, and was found guilty and hanged at Tyburn on 30th November 1774. All the names mentioned in the picture were involved in the defence at the trial, and the use of playing cards and a promissory note in the picture suggested that gambling debts may have driven William Lewis to so reckless a crime. A Mr. Jacob Roberts of 55 Chandos Street, Covent Garden is a recurring character referenced in both *Washington's* and our current *Deception*. Roberts was the Lewis family's landlord and acted as a character witness for William at his trial. Indeed, 55 Chandos Street is registered as Samuel Lewis's address in the exhibition records from 1791, seventeen years after the trial, so we can assume that Jacob Roberts was a longstanding acquaintance of the Lewis family. The reference to his name is on a theatre ticket in the top right corner of the painting shown as 'For the Benefit of Mr Roberts'.

If the hidden narrative of the *Washington* picture explores the sad tale of William Lewis's death, then this pendant perhaps alludes to a happier tale. The sheet music in the lower right for the 'Married Man', the adverts for perfume and the conspicuous use of the words 'wine' and 'parties' suggest a more celebratory narrative. In this context the playing cards and lottery tickets presumably suggest that fortune turned for the better.

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APPENDIX:



1. *The Public Ledger*, Thursday July 6th 1775. A long-running British newspaper (1760-2017), that was neutral in political opinion; funded through advertising rather than political party subsidies as was common at the time, hence the part-visible mantra “Open to All Parties, but Influenced by None”. The date here is of significance as the day that Congress issued a “Declaration on the Causes and Necessity of Taking Up Arms” against British authority in the American colonies. The subsequent resistance by King George III and Parliament to this declaration lead to the enlargement of the British army and Royal Navy, and pushed Congress to move to a declaration of independence the following year.
2. A stub for the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden. The Mr Dunstall referenced refers to the actor John Dunstall (1717-1778) who appears in many paintings and prints of the age, most famously in Zoffany’s conversation piece *Love in a Village* painted in 1767 (Yale Center for British Art, B1985.19.6).
3. Rider’s British Merlin, 1760. An annual almanac containing useful information for the year, including monthly horticultural notes, saints’ days, and the dates and locations for fairs. These fairs were important for buying and selling and to exhibit innovations in husbandry. The description obscured in the picture reads “Notes on Husbandry, Fairs, Marts, High Roads, and Tables for many necessary uses”.
4. Gibson & Co. was a manufacturer of playing cards founded by Charles Gibson in 1770.
5. A ticket to the British Museum.
6. Three lottery tickets.
7. A theatre ticket for *The Heroine of the Cave* by Irish playwright and poet Paul Hiffernan (1719-1777). The play was first performed 19th March 1774, the date of ticket shown. The Mr Reddish mentioned was the actor and theatre manager Samuel Reddish (1735-1785), who died in a lunatic asylum at York.
8. Two coach tickets.
9. A theatre ticket to *The Inconstant*, a play by George Farquhar (1677-1707) first performed in 1702 that was revived several times in the 18th and 19th centuries. The Mr Roberts mentioned may reference was the Lewis family landlord at 55 Chandos Street.