

## Ben Austrian

Ben Austrian was a native Pennsylvanian from Reading, who lived there all his life. As a child, he was encouraged by his mother in drawing and painting, and some of his earliest works were of farmyard chicks. The love of animals permeates his work, and the artist's subjects include hens and their chicks, cats, dogs, horses, game and the occasional fruit still life. Austrian's trompe l'oeil game pieces, like *From Old Virginia*, are the crowning achievements of his career.

William Harnett and John Frederick Peto popularized trompe l'oeil hanging game pieces in the 1880's. Ben Austrian decided to try his hand at game pieces in 1899 with a painting titled *A Day's Hunt*. The painting was enthusiastically received and resulted in Austrian continuing to paint trompe l'oeil hanging game.

In 1901, Austrian painted *After a South Wind*. Measuring 74 x 38 inches, it depicts a brace of 23 ducks hanging against a door. In *From Old Virginia*, executed eight years later, Austrian has refined both the composition and his technique. The painting is also somewhat smaller at 65 x 45 inches. By reducing the number of ducks, the painting becomes more realistic and believable, resulting in a more dynamic composition.

In an interview with his local newspaper, the *Reading Times*, Austrian describes how he painted these hanging game pieces: "I conceived the idea first as to how in my mind a bunch of ducks hang on a nail would look, then I made a rapid sketch in my head of the various colors and how they would look most attractive. Then I took the ducks one by one and sketched them in. This had to be done rapidly, as I could only work several hours at a time on each one before the feathers had a chance to thaw out and the position change. When the sketch was finished, I began to paint them in, using the birds and never painting by chance. Every duck in the picture is as near to itself as paint and brush can make it."

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