

# After the Hunt: The Trompe L'Oeil Art of David Brega

by Jeanne Schinto  
Photos courtesy David Brega

As a *M.A.D.* reporter who covers shows and auctions of traditional art, I rarely get a chance to meet living artists, so I eagerly took up David Brega's invitation to visit him in his studio-gallery in Marshfield, Massachusetts, last summer. Brega's specialty is trompe l'oeil. That's the term, meaning "fools the eye," for still life paintings that look uncannily like arrangements of actual objects: an old violin hanging by a string on a peg, a rack of letters held in place by ribbons and thumbtacks, a torn dollar bill taped to a piece of wood. Brega is considered by many to be one of the best practitioners working in the genre today. Having admired paintings of his at contemporary art shows, I was prepared to see more great examples on my visit. What I hadn't expected was also to see some great pieces of folk art. In fact, the place looked like a dealer's shop, minus price tags.

Brega, who was born in East Longmeadow, Massachusetts, on Christmas Day 1948, grew up in a house without antiques, but when he was a young artist, the hunt for them and their use as subjects for his paintings became an integral part of his creative process. Along the way, he nurtured a love and appreciation for old surfaces. There was a time when he couldn't drive by an antiques shop and not pull in, he has said. It's also true that his trompe l'oeil of the February 1973 cover of *The Magazine Antiques* was instrumental in the launch of his career.

That cover shows Gilbert Stuart's well-known portrait of Scottish barrister William Grant moving across a frozen pond on ice skates, arms crossed. Brega painted the cover to look as if he had torn it from the magazine and affixed it to a painted wooden door. Tucked in front and behind it are antique postcards, handwritten message sides up. As for the door, "I borrowed it," said Brega. "It was under a stairway in an antique house in Duxbury [Massachusetts]." The building doubled as a shop. "I think the guy sold books and some antiques, and he let me take the door right off its hinges and bring it back to my studio."

That was in 1986. By then, Brega had been painting full time for six years. Previously, after graduation from art school in 1973, he had made a living painting billboards in Los Angeles, Las Vegas, and then back in Massachusetts. His last job was working for Ackerley Communications, which was headquartered in Boston.



*Nature Boy*, 2012, oil on masonite, 36" x 28". For one of Brega's most recent works, he painted what, in effect, appears to be a recent issue of *Time* magazine with a photograph of Aerosmith's Steven Tyler on the cover. "It's not only a fool-the-eye painting. The elements don't exist. I fabricated the whole thing," he said. *Time* magazine never ran Tyler's picture nor did it run an article whose title, "Trompe L'Oeil: The Provocative Language of Illusion," suggests a complementary article inside. Brega worked from a photograph of Tyler taken by Tyler's daughter Liv. The page of sheet music tucked behind it is a song beloved by Tyler in childhood, "Nature Boy" by Eden Ahbez, a hippie precursor who achieved cult status in the mid-20th century, just as Tyler did in his era. In typical trompe l'oeil manner, both magazine cover and music are seemingly fastened to a door with bits of tape.



David Brega with his elderly Shetland sheepdog, Rudy. The barn is at Worthington Pond Farm in Somers, Connecticut. The property is owned by Dan Roulier, a longtime friend of Brega and collector of both his and Douglas Brega's work. Photo credit: David Butler.

He remembers that the first day of his life as a committed artist was April 20, 1981, a Monday. "It was the first day I didn't get on the expressway to go to work," he said.

By the mid-1980's, Brega had already enjoyed some success. His former wife, Lynn Brega, told me, "He was with a gallery in Connecticut for a few years, a small place, and he did very well. He had picked up some collectors before he went with Alex"—that is, Alexander Acevedo of Madison Avenue's Alexander Gallery.

Drawn by the gallerist's clever ads, Brega went there to see a show on Sanford Robinson Gifford. "Before I left, I asked one of the gallery assistants, 'Does this guy ever show contemporary artists?' She said, 'No, not really, but send him some transparen-

cies.'" The night of the day they arrived on Acevedo's desk, Brega got a phone call from Acevedo, who invited him to return to New York and bring in some paintings. One of those he brought was *The Magazine Antiques*.

"I was really nervous, worried about things like what I was wearing," Brega recalled, but he probably could have been wearing a barrel, as far as Acevedo was concerned. "He said, 'I'd like to sell this painting, and I can sell it to the largest collector of American art today.' That was Richard Manoogian." And that's exactly what Acevedo did.

That same year, 1986, the gallerist gave Brega his first solo show, *David Brega, Trompe L'Oeil: The Provocative Language of Illusion*. It consisted of 21 paintings, five borrowed back



*The Magazine Antiques*, 1986, oil on masonite, 27" x 20½".



*Colors*, 1999-2000, oil on masonite, 67" x 50".



*Return to Sender*, 1997, oil on masonite, 18" x 12". The envelope says: "Jane Crofut, Crofut Farm, Grover's Corners, Sutton County, New Hampshire, United States of America, Continent of North America, Western Hemisphere, The Earth, The Solar System, The Universe, The Mind of God." It's based on the famous lines from Thornton Wilder's play *Our Town*. The painting was commissioned by *Yankee* magazine for a piece on letter writing.

from their owners and the rest for sale. As Brega remembers it, "The show opened at six. When I got there, it was packed, and people were asking me, 'How much is this? How much is that?' I found Alex, and said, 'Where are the prices?' And he said, 'They're all sold.'" The show had been open for 15 minutes.

A second successful show at the Alexander Gallery, *Please Do Not Touch*, followed in 1991. "Over the years, Alex helped me in many ways, with my career, financially, and, most importantly, with what I painted," Brega said. "He told me, 'I'll never tell you what to paint, but I can tell you what sells.' I am deeply indebted to him." But of course you need the ability to produce what sells in the first place.

Alex Boyle, a private dealer of 19th- and 20th-century American and European paintings, was Acevedo's framer at the time of that second show. "So I'm familiar with David's work going back twenty-plus years," Boyle said. "To be on retainer for Alex, in order for that to happen, you've got to be a master. In order to satisfy such a patron, you have to be excellent and that's just for starters. His draftsmanship—it's mind-blowing. Digital reproduc-

tions do not do it justice. It's easy to say his work is amazing."

But while his work *The Magazine Antiques* led to Brega's commercial breakthrough, it was the acquisition and painting of an antique nearly ten years earlier in 1977 that was crucial to his artistic development. The painting is titled *Key Shadow*. It is essentially a detailed closeup of the surface of a 19th-century sugar bin: its grain, a stain, a key in its lock, and the shadows that the key and the bin's knobs cast on the old wood's surface.

"We were married in '73 while we were living in California, and David was always looking for things to paint," Lynn Brega recounted. "We were doing antiques shops in Long Beach. That's where we got the first antique we ever bought." It was the bin.

"I had always wanted to paint that bin, because subject matter is key," said Brega. "After that, a successful painting is all about composition. And design is what I pride myself on. It stems from a basic exercise Ken taught in composition." That is, Ken Davies, Brega's teacher at the Paier School of Art in New Haven, now Paier College of Art in Hamden, Connecticut. "Ken





*The Editor*, 1984, oil on masonite, 38 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 28 $\frac{1}{2}$ ". That's a chimney cupboard behind an image of Horace Greeley. "It was in an antique house that I lived in," Brega said. "Right below and to the right of it [in the house] is a fireplace and mantel." Why did he choose to paint Greeley? "Well, I liked his mutton chops. It was just a real cool print of him. And as you know, he's the guy who said, 'Go West, young man,'" which Brega did. That's where he painted billboards, and he credits that experience with helping to make him a painter of fine art. "What really catapulted the skill was the billboards—that type of discipline," he told me. "Spending hours of the morning just mixing the paint and then going out and painting anything from faces to cars to shiny bottles. Art school was the starter, but the billboard business instilled the discipline."

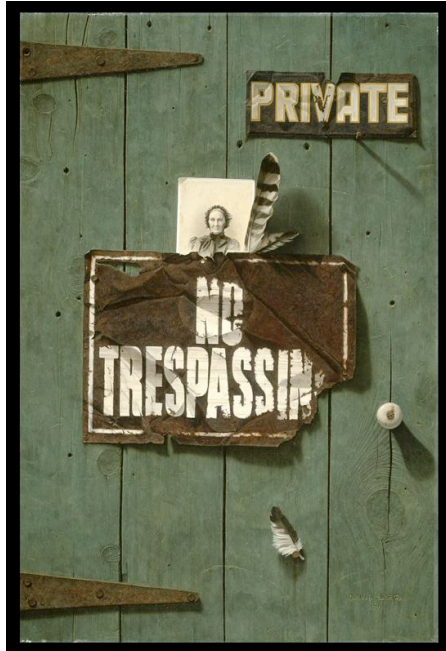


*Founding Father*, 2003, oil on masonite, 42" x 33". Brega painted this one for his 2003 solo show at Vose Galleries in Boston called *Eyeful*. Besides the reproduction of Gilbert Stuart's John Adams portrait, it depicts an actual letter from William Trost Richards to Robert C. Vose, asking him for an advance. The curtained antique door is owned by the artist.

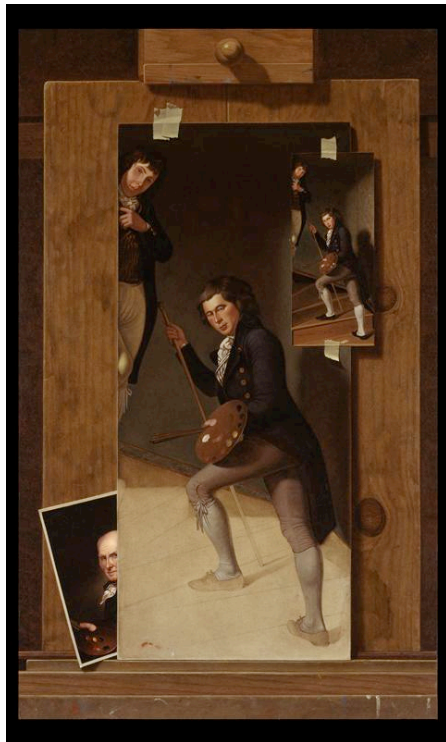
helped me with the setup for *Key Shadow*. He was very generous," said Brega. It was four years after graduation, but the teacher and student had stayed in touch. Davies suggested that Brega move some of the elements, adding imagination to the mix, for the sake of a more aesthetically pleasing trompe l'oeil.

On a visit to Davies, now 88 years old, I discovered that he is someone whose own house and studio in Madison, Connecticut, is filled with antiques and collections of all kinds. He is also someone who has had his own highly successful career as an artist (see [www.kendaviesart.com]). He called David Brega one of the most gifted students whom he taught in his 40-year career at Paier. Brega, in turn, called Davies "invaluable." He's ever thankful that the elder artist "took a liking to us."

That "us" was Brega and his twin, Douglas, a gifted watercolorist who is often compared to Andrew Wyeth. "Ken Davies, he's the king," said Doug, who still lives in the brothers' hometown, when I spoke to him by phone. After Ken, Doug told me he has always relied on his brother's counsel. (The twins speak



*No Trespassin'*, 1993, oil on masonite, 33" x 22". When Brega saw this door in an antiques shop on Route 6A in Barnstable, Massachusetts, on Cape Cod, the door was red, and there were things hanging all over it, he told me. "The dealer let me borrow it, bring it to my studio, asking that I leave everything as it was. I lived with it for a little while and took many pictures of it in its original form, and then I disassembled everything, doing what she had told me not to do, so that I could paint it the way I wanted to. And then I put everything back the way it was. I changed the door's color to green so that everything else would pop out."



*Peel'n Off the Peales*, 1997, oil on masonite, 32" x 19 $\frac{1}{2}$ ", is Brega's knockoff of Charles Willson Peale's trompe l'oeil *Staircase Group*, a 1795 oil on canvas in the collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The two young men are Peale's sons Raphaelle and Titian Ramsay Peale. Note that a print of *Staircase Group* appears to be taped to the painting's surface to further suggest that the work is still in progress. The image below is Charles Willson Peale himself. "That's Dad looking on," said Brega.

on the phone every day.) "After that, there really isn't anybody else who comes close," Doug declared.

David Brega sold *Key Shadow* to William R. Berkley of the W.R. Berkley Corporation within the year of its completion. The Bregas still own the bin. It's in the front hallway of Lynn's house in Somerville, Massachusetts—a house filled with antique furniture, baskets, quilts, and other folk-art objects. She and her former husband remain good friends and never did break up their collections. You could say they have joint custody. "He comes here to borrow things," said Lynn. "And I go to his studio and say, 'Can I have that for a while?'" When I visited her, she had just brought some of their

birdhouses back to her place. "He had a lovely show for another artist last year [who did bird drawings]," she said. "So we brought all our birdhouses out for it. It was a nice, little effect."

Reminiscing about their more than 20 years of antiquing together, Lynn said, "David and I had a ton of fun buying all this stuff. He bought things he thought would be interesting for paintings. And then I, being my own person, would say, 'Oh, I love these. Do you think we could get one of them?' Or, 'Could we get this chair?'" Very often, however, the two purposes merged. Indeed, David credits Lynn as an early collaborator, because of their antiques-shop forays and then Lynn's way of using objects as decorations in their home. "For the first couple of decades of my career she was very instrumental—her eye," the artist said. "I would come home, and she would have stuff set up, not necessarily for me, but just to have it in the house to look

dled so much, thrown and spun by kids," said David. "And some of the buckets possess just wonderful aging." But he doesn't copy these features exactly, no more than he did for *Key Shadow* long ago. "When I paint a surface, much of its texture is invented or suggested. I put a crack, a little crevice, a nick here or there, a nail hole where I want to put it." The name of the process, coined by Ken Davies, is "selective rendering," he said.

On his search for inspiring objects, the artist bought many pieces from dealers who rent space at Antique Associates At West Townsend, Massachusetts. He bought particularly from Ellie Hoehn, who also rents at three other shops in Massachusetts and has her own shop, Springbrook Antiques, in Marshfield. Just to cite one example, a white-painted wood finial Brega bought from Hoehn figures in a painting he titled *Finial's Rainbow*. The finial is sitting on an old painted shelf with a drawer he bought at

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nice. When deciding on a composition, I would ultimately run it by Lynn for her stamp of approval."

Lynn, for her part, said, "You learn early on not to suggest overtly. 'Why don't you paint this? Why don't you paint that?' I think I've been somewhat inspiring, arranging things." But for sure, going antiquing with him was an explicit way she shared in his artistic labors. "For many, many years, I was his partner in crime," Lynn said. "'Let's go in here.' You know, hit the brakes, back up. That kind of thing. 'Look at that, they've got stuff outside, let's stop.'"

Often, the Bregas' two children came along on these antiquing jaunts. "We dragged those kids through tons of places," said Lynn. "My son was always a toucher. 'Put your hands in your pockets, please.' He could never do that. Yet [the son and daughter] don't have the antique bug. I guess there's a lesson there."

At first, the Bregas sacrificed for their antiques habit. "As a collector, what do you do? You find a way," said Lynn, who has worked as an X-ray technician and continues to work in the medical field in Boston. "We'd say, 'You know, we don't need to eat this week.'" She laughed. "It was tough getting by, but not like today. Back then, thirty dollars bought us a week's worth of groceries." Better times came during David's years with Alexander Gallery. "Those shows were always terrifically important and fun," said Lynn. "We made some money and bought more antiques."

When the marriage ended, Lynn continued to collect, but different things and in different ways than before. "I've gone past where we were in the marriage [in terms of collecting]," she said. "I've gone into a sort of cottage feeling whereas previously we had some formal antique furniture. I also started collecting horse objects, and I have a small collection of old-fashioned mousetraps. I have a couple of metal ones. There are some interesting contraptions. I like the ones that save the little critter instead of crushing it to death."

On the day I visited Brega in his studio-gallery, the former Hatch Livery Stables in Marshfield, Massachusetts, he had just finished a painting he titled *A Road Less Traveled*. It was a trompe l'oeil of an old, black-stenciled "Road Closed" sign with an orange background and an antique white-painted metal toy ambulance in front of it. The actual sign, the actual car—the setup—were nearby, on a big antique gray-painted stepback cupboard. The cupboard's shelves were filled with architectural pieces, decoys, a teddy bear, baskets, boxes, buckets, game boards, and antique wooden and metal toys.

"Some of those toy tops have beautiful surfaces, because they've been han-

dled so much, thrown and spun by kids," said David. "And some of the buckets possess just wonderful aging." But he doesn't copy these features exactly, no more than he did for *Key Shadow* long ago. "When I paint a surface, much of its texture is invented or suggested. I put a crack, a little crevice, a nick here or there, a nail hole where I want to put it." The name of the process, coined by Ken Davies, is "selective rendering," he said.

For the background of a trompe l'oeil titled *Martha by Stuart*, he used an old blue door that he may have bought at the annual fall antiques show at Historic Deerfield one year. He can't quite recall, but he does remember, "It was hanging on a white wall as a piece of folk art." To that surface he "taped" what appears to be a small reproduction of Gilbert Stuart's portrait of Martha Washington. Tucked behind it is an old envelope with a stamp bearing George Washington's visage. "I have a lot of those envelopes, and everything just fit perfectly, and there was an interesting light source. This painting is really trompy." That's because the tape really does look as if it could be peeled away. "I ask people, if they do take the tape off, to please put it back in the same place," he said with a smile.

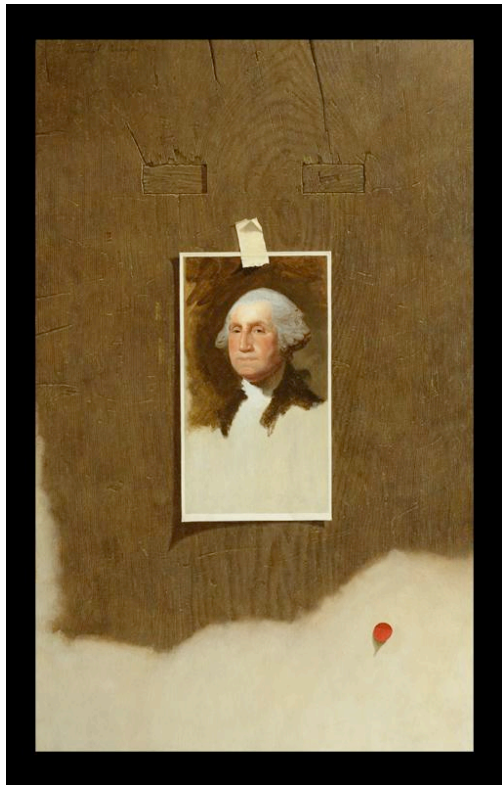
Some key pieces, used more than once, came from Thomas K. Woodard of Manhattan. Brega has also used antique toys owned by Alex Acevedo as props. "Alex had toys that were kind of out of my league," said Brega. However, for a painting Brega titled *Catch Me If You Can*, the artist used a toy of his own that cost him only \$36. He bought it out of an antiques coop in the Sturbridge Village area.

For a relatively large (40" x 50") trompe l'oeil titled *Grade 4*, he painted a large classroom chalkboard that he borrowed from Heritage Museum & Gardens in Sandwich, Massachusetts. For the sake of the composition, he added molding so he could "display" little objects on it—a pointer, an alphabet block, a couple of miniature books. Resting on the chalkboard's ledge are pieces of colored chalk, an eraser, and a little bell, all of which appear to cast shadows. Tucked inside the frame are a reproduction of Gilbert Stuart's unfinished portrait of Washington and one of Thomas Sully's *Torn Hat*, with the sunlight that comes through the tear shining on the boy's forehead.

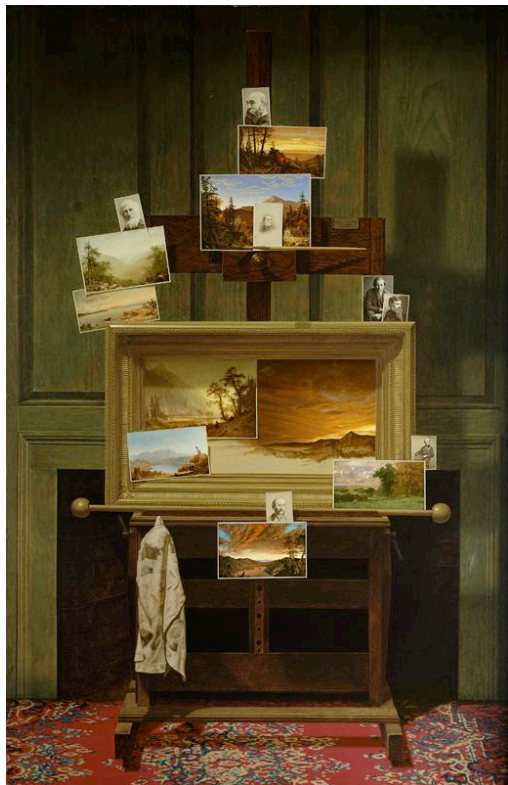
As readers may have already known or now have gathered, a trompe l'oeil usually involves a bit of tomfoolery—a clever title, a visual pun, some hidden joke or message—in addition to the playful deception of the trompe l'oeil itself. One example is the Martha Stewart allusion in the title *Martha by Stuart*. More elaborately, on the green crayon in a Brega trompe l'oeil titled *The Crayon Box* that appeared on the cover of *Yankee* magazine, the artist wrote "red." He was very amused to hear that people wrote and called *Yankee* to point out the error.

One of Brega's masterpieces, *Homage*, is a much more complicated





**Unfinished Business**, 1993, oil on masonite, 26" x 16". A reproduction of Gilbert Stuart's unfinished Washington portrait is seemingly taped to an antique wooden surface. Just as Stuart didn't complete the bottom part of his painting, Brega left his blank in the same way, save for a red "sold" dot that casts the tiniest hint of a shadow.



**Homage**, 1990-91, oil on masonite, 74" x 48". In 1996, this painting was featured at the Knoxville Museum of Art in Knoxville, Tennessee, in the exhibition *American Grandeur: Masterpieces from the MASCO and Manoogian Collection*. It was the only work by a living artist in the show.



A door of this gray-painted stepback cupboard was used for the background of Brega's *Nature Boy*. The painting was finished in 2012, but the fabricated *Time* magazine cover of Aerosmith's Steven Tyler is still taped up against the door (on bottom right). The old "Road Closed" sign and antique metal ambulance in white paint above the Tyler image was the setup for a 2013 painting, *A Road Less Traveled*. Schinto photo.

piece of cleverness, a genuine tour-de-force, completed 1990-91. At 74" x 48", this unusually large trompe l'oeil purports to depict an unfinished landscape on an easel. "The landscape never existed. It only exists here in my composition," he said. "It's actually my attempt at a Hudson River school painting." Small reproductions of eight more landscapes are attached to the painting's frame and the easel—Brega's inspirations. They are works by Thomas Cole, Asher B. Durand, Martin Johnson Heade, Albert Bierstadt, Frederic Edwin Church, Sanford Robinson Gifford, Worthington Whittredge, and George Inness. There are also cartes de visite of all the artists except Bierstadt and Gifford. In their place are photographic images of Alexander Helwig Wyant and Acevedo. There is no painting by Wyant; Brega added his likeness because he found Wyant's beard fascinating, and it looked like fun to paint. As for Acevedo, he said, "He inspired the whole painting," which amounts to a series of virtuosic impersonations in paint.

Brega never owned any Hudson River school painting as exalted as these, but Richard Manoogian owns the Whittredge and the Inness. (He also owns *Homage*.) In the background of *Homage* is an antique mantelpiece, and the artist did once own that. "I built a reproduction Cape house and bought the mantelpiece for it," said Brega, who sold the house some years ago and last year sold the mantelpiece for \$10,000 to an architect/interior designer, who put it into a house in New York. Brega paid about \$4000 for it in 1986.

Trompe l'oeil artists do best when painting relatively flat objects. The less flat they are, the more difficult it is to create the illusion that they're real. For another very large (67" x 50") trompe l'oeil titled *Colors*, Brega tackled the subject of a piece of vintage clothing quite a few inches deep: a leather motorcycle jacket that belongs to the drummer of the band Aerosmith, Joey Kramer, who picked it up somewhere in Australia. Adding to the challenge, the jacket is festooned with biker trinkets (skulls, chains, patches, even somebody's old molar) and club patches. Brega credits a colleague, the noted marine painter Michael Keane, with his help on the setup. Behind the jacket, which is seemingly hanging from a

hanger, is an American flag. The title refers to it, but "colors" is also the term for a biker club's jacket patches. It's a neat double entendre, but titles are easy to come up with, compared with the execution of a painting like this. It took the artist two years to complete it.

Brega delivered *Colors*, still wet, to the Michele & Donald D'Amour Museum of Fine Arts in Springfield, Massachusetts, for the opening of his first major museum show in 2000. Called *Oil & Water*, it was a 25-year joint retrospective with his watercolorist twin that traveled to the Albrecht-Kemper Museum of Art, St. Joseph, Missouri, in 2001. On the opening night in Springfield, collector Crosby Kemper, a major supporter of Brega's career, bought *Colors* for \$250,000. The painting is now a part of the permanent collection of the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art in Kansas City, Missouri.

You can buy all the antiques and collectibles in the world, and you can set them up exactly right, but how on earth *does* a trompe l'oeil artist make painted objects look as if they're really there?

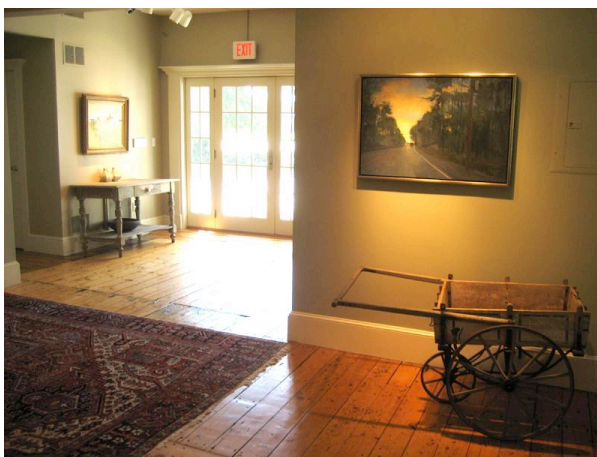
Alex Boyle said of another younger trompe l'oeil artist he knows, "If he painted full-time for twenty years, he'd come close to David, who has been able to refine his talents and craft to a degree that's almost unthinkable. You have to practice to be that perfect."

As for Brega's own explanation, he has none. "I have trouble with the gift thing," he told me. "I think my brother and I were born with healthy cerebellums. We were very eye-hand coordinated. As jocks in high school, we played football and basketball and did track. We'd watch someone swing a bat or a golf club and copy them." He contrasted their abilities with those of "the child prodigy who wakes up one morning and sings like Pavarotti or plays classical piano. To me, *that's* a gift," he said.

However he does it, at the heart of Brega's art is a curious paradox. It's all about playful deception. He's happy when he has fooled us, if only for a moment, into believing we'll be able to reach into his painting and touch something that actually isn't there at all. And yet he necessarily begins with something very real: an object—more often than not, an



Glimpse of the studio/gallery. Schinto photo.



The wooden cart came from Brega's from longtime friend and antiques dealer Ellie Hoehn. The painting on the wall is *Vortex* by Sue Charles of Marshfield Hills, Massachusetts. This is in the gallery portion of Brega's studio/gallery in Marshfield. Schinto photo.

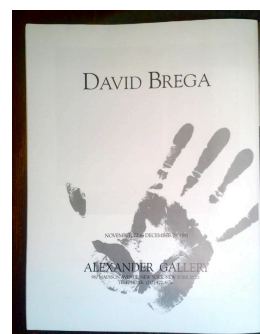


The setup for *A Road Less Traveled*, 2013, oil on masonite, 22 1/4" x 21 1/4".



Gray-painted cupboard and antique toy. The framed image is a print of a painting by Norman Rockwell called *Checkers*. Schinto photo.

Ad for David Brega's exhibition *Please Do Not Touch* at the Alexander Gallery from *The Magazine Antiques*, November 1991. From New York City the show traveled to Grosse Pointe, Michigan; Boston; and Washington, D.C. Schinto photo.



antique. "That's when I'm inspired," Brega said. "That's where it all begins, with a prop. When I see something in an antique shop, or at a friend's house, or in a stranger's house, and its shape, its color, or more importantly, its patina catches my eye, that's everything."

For more information, see Brega's Web site ([www.davidbrega.com](http://www.davidbrega.com)).



Blue-painted spice chest with white-painted finial. Schinto photo.