Focusing on the work of Hugh Henry Brackenridge and Patience Wright, this essay discusses the nature and function of two media of art in late eighteenth-century America: the medium of the book and the medium of wax. The essay is divided into four parts. The first part engages with current scholarship on the early American novel and argues that its strong focus on the political significance of textual tensions and contradictions needs to be supplemented with an aesthetic approach. Such an approach reads early novels within the context of contemporaneous European discourses concerning the nature and function of art. From this vantage point, textual tensions and contradictions are seen less as reflections of ideological strains within late eighteenth-century society and politics than as traces of a shift in the positioning of art within the social whole. The second part argues that the systems-theoretic concept of functional differentiation provides us with an adequate intellectual framework for making sense of that shift. Drawing primarily on the work of Niklas Luhmann and Niels Werber, I argue that both early American novels and mid to late eighteenth-century aesthetic theories are caught between a pre-modern and a modern understanding of the social functions of art. The third part focuses on debates concerning the truth value of fiction in general and the U.S. anti-fiction movement of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in particular. Moral arbiters' concerns about the deceptiveness of novels are taken seriously insofar as deception is seen as integral to novelists' creations of fictional worlds. Accordingly, the reasons for diatribes against novels are located less in their political subversiveness than in the nature of fiction itself. The fourth and final part of this essay shifts attention from the medium of the book to the medium of wax. In related but different ways, the wax effigies of (in)famous sculptor Patience Wright raise concerns about the truth value of art and its ability to deceive the spectator. John and Abigail Adams's troubled responses to Wright's work are taken as a focal point to think about the place of both wax sculptures and fiction in a culture marked by profound anxieties concerning the possibility of deception in the sociopolitical realm. The essay concludes with a call to interpret the cultural anxieties art negotiates as well as generates in both political and aesthetic terms.

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