

On the Content of a Figure and the Form of a Ground

When I was a child of maybe seven, trying to emulate my father—who was an artist—I showed him a drawing I made of the face of Dick Tracy—a popular comic strip character at the time. It was mainly an outline of his very angular profile. My father liked it a lot, but then drew another profile of a man, showing me what a more realistic face would look like, with all its curves and bumps. This distant memory was my introduction to the difference between an illusory profile and a real profile; while at the same time planting the first seed of inquiry into the difference between art and reality. It also introduced me to the borderline between the figure and the background—or, in other words, the “outline.”



In school, the teacher would show us a series of crude pictures depicting farm and domestic animals with corresponding captions (e.g., COW, DOG, HEN, CAT, etc.). Each “animal” was barely an outline floating in the void. I wondered why my dog, *Lucky*, didn’t look at all like the “dog” in the picture. *Lucky* was a black cocker spaniel, while the school dog was mustard yellow. At night you couldn’t tell the difference between *Lucky* and our dark patio. I guess the teacher didn’t know the saying “All cats are grey in the night.”

This manner of depiction continued as I progressed up the higher grades. The graphic illustrations of our patriots and heroes in our history textbooks were portraits of mustachioed men outlined before an empty space we interpreted as heaven. Later in my college years, studying art and architecture, I could no longer avoid dealing with the figure/ground dichotomy, as we learned about the prehistoric cave paintings in places like Altamira and Lascaux, which depicted crudely outlined figures of animals floating before the neutral cave backgrounds.

In our art history class, we learned that the depiction of a human figure outlined before a blank background first appeared in ancient Greece. The so-called “White-ground technique” is a style of white ancient Greek pottery and painting in which figures appear on a white background. It developed in the region of Attica, and was especially associated with vases made for ritual and funerary use. The use of a white ground in conjunction with outline painting developed later, when black-figure vase painting on white ground was probably introduced by the potter Nikosthenes around 530/525 BCE. ¹



Before the 20th century, all simple black-and-white drawings depicted (delineated) an object by a black outline that separated it from a background (generally white) of lesser or no importance. Psychologists say that “Figure–ground organization” is a type of perceptual grouping necessary for recognizing objects through

vision. In Gestalt psychology it is known as identifying a *figure* from the *background*. For example, black words on a printed paper are seen as the "figure", and the white sheet as the "background."²



Picasso – '25.9.65 Nimes VII'

This does not necessarily diminish the importance of backgrounds, especially in painting. Jean Bouman, 17th century Alsatian painter, once said that “nothing can become intelligible unless seen against a background, a surrounding field, a periphery. A figure without limits is unthinkable.”

However, 20th century Modernist artists examined, accentuated, or subverted the figure-ground relationship in two-dimensional works. The Cubists and the Futurists –for example– who were concerned with portraying multiple viewpoints, fractured the picture plane into fragments, flattening space so that figure and ground became indistinguishable.³

When we focus on a person –whether in his or her presence or in any reproduction– we tend to see an imaginary outline separating the image from its background. This is an illusion created by the immediate importance we attach to that person vis-à-vis her or his environment. A similar distortion occurs with a representation of any object – “realistic” or symbolic– such as a grapefruit on a still life, or a fleur-de-lis on a flag.

The greater the emotional investment on the figure, the greater the separation from the ground. Thus, it matters little if the army coat is ragged or dirty, as long as the gold rim of the medal pinned on it is polished and bright. Identification with a national or religious symbol emblazoned on a banner or hoisted flag can mobilize thousands to carry out heroic deeds –even to give up their lives– regardless of the ambivalent justification for, or the rational background of their cause, or the infantile fallacies of their anachronistic superstitions.

Even as I write, thousands of innocent civilians are being slaughtered over a centuries-old territorial dispute about the borderlines of a map and who has the right to dwell therein.

Written by © Pascual Delgado, November 27th 2023

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/White_ground_technique

² [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Figure%E2%80%93ground_\(perception\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Figure%E2%80%93ground_(perception))

³ <https://www.artsy.net/article/editorial-decoding-artspeak-figure-and-ground>