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Introduction: Beyond Figuration

"THERE IS THE FIGURE—AND YET."

We owe the Italian Renaissance picture more than the idealized human figure. To be sure, Giotto, Donatello, Raphael, Michelangelo, and Titian, just to unfurl a triumphalist banner of some of the protagonists in this era, are cer-tainly preoccupied with the body—be it Christ suffering on the cross, a heroine enacting a mythological narrative, or, in a more secular vein, a portrait of a pope, princess, or duke. Renaissance writers on art, too, devoted much of their critical thinking toward describing and prescribing how artists portrayed the figure. Giorgio Vasari, author of the germinal *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* (1550/1568), articulated one of his most significant art theoretical concepts—*maniera*, which we might translate loosely as "style"—in relation to the portrayal of the human body. Seeking to explain the characteristics of the third age of art—the climax in his history—Vasari declares that "*maniera* reached the greatest beauty from the practice of incessantly imitating the most beautiful objects, and joining together, and joining these most beautiful things, hands, bodies, and legs." This practice, Vasari continues, was carried out "in *every* work for *all* figures, and for that reason it is called the beautiful manner." It is no accident, then, that the human figure has been identified by Michael Cole, in his perceptive volume on the subject, as "the single most continuous feature of Italian Renaissance art." And as he points out—not without a note of irony—the body's ubiquity "demonstrates its banality."[1]

The Renaissance picture *is* the figure—and yet.[2] I have chosen this qualifying epigraph to make an obvious yet often overlooked point: there is no figure without ground. It is painting's sine qua non, without which the picture cannot exist and convey meaning. But what do we mean when we refer to the "ground" of painting? What aspects of the Renaissance picture do we group under this category?

The dyad figure/ground that features in art historical writing presumably refers to ground as the field around and against which figuration occurs. More fundamentally, ground can be defined as "any material surface, natural

Detail, Figure 3.1

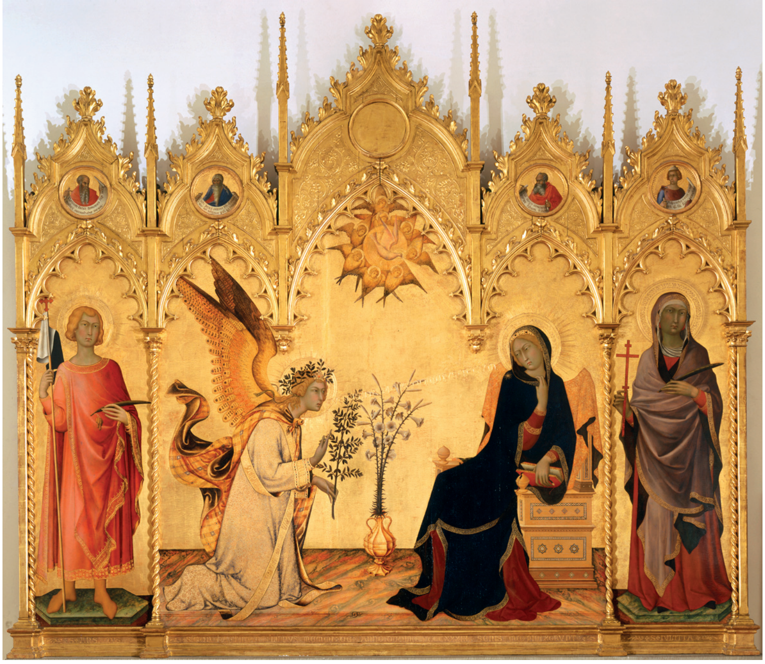
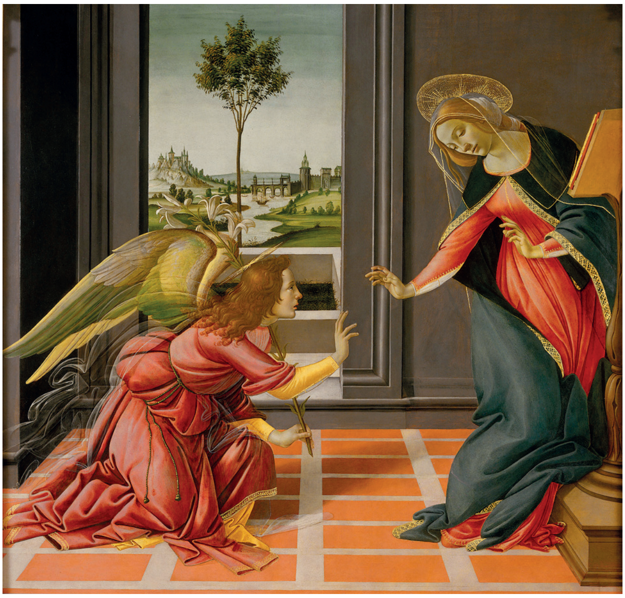


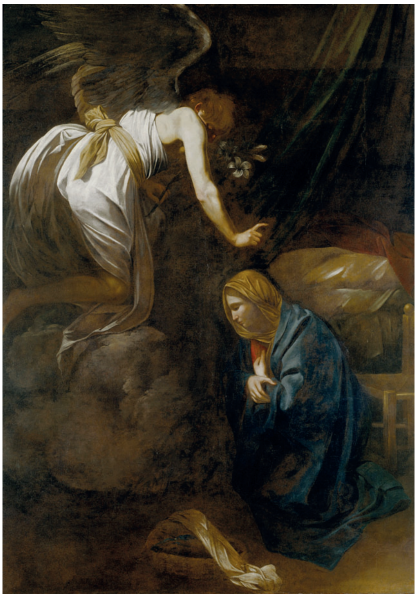
Fig. I.1. Simone Martini, *Annunciation with Saints Ansano and Margaret, and Four Medallions of Prophets Jeremiah, Ezechiel, Isaiah, and Daniel*, 1333. Tempera on panel. (184 × 210 cm). Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

or prepared, which is taken as a basis for working upon." A dictionary entry might further elaborate that ground is "a main surface or first coating of color, serving as a support for other colors or a background for designs." These preliminary definitions of ground—ground as material support and ground as field—are certainly implied when art historians write of, or more properly, write over the empty ground that surrounds Michelangelo's figures in his *Last Judgment*, or else when they speak of tenebrist painters, whom they often describe as working up layers of paint from a reddish-brown ground layer.[3]

How ground has been defined in and of itself may account for why it has been overlooked in favor of other elements, such as figure and perspective. While I will return to these issues in more depth in chapter 1, for now let us consider the dominance of the figure, which is often understood as self-constituting and self-sufficient. Projecting out into space by means of foreshortening and coloring, the human body becomes the primary focus of the viewer's attention, the site where meaning purports to be located and contained. By contrast, ground is what we might call *prepositional*: it only exists when couched in territorial relation to the autonomous substantive. In the Renaissance, ground appears above, against, along, around, behind, below, beneath, and with the figure—rarely without it.

Meanwhile, backgrounds also register shifts in Renaissance painting. Over the course of the fifteenth century, gold grounds give way to perspectival and landscape views; in turn, backgrounds darken and disappear in the chiaroscuro painting of the late sixteenth century. Grounds also often stage





the tension between the picture's status as an object, which is associated with a tradition of craftsmanship, and the picture's status as an illusionistic representation, which is associated with the new category of "art." Three works from the fourteenth to the seventeenth century depicting the Annunciation—when the Archangel Gabriel informs the Virgin Mary that she is "blessed among women," will conceive in her womb and bring forth Christ in the world (Luke 1:26)—demonstrate the breadth of difference in the uses of ground.

In these cases, grounds are more than featureless, meaningless planes hidden beneath, below, or behind the figure. They spring out, calling for our attention. Grounds impinge on figuration and therefore function as a material, perceptual, and semantic variable in the Renaissance picture. In the first example (fig. I.1), a gold background unifies the Archangel Gabriel and the Virgin in an otherworldly space. The cracks on the surface reveal the seams where the rectangular gold leaves overlap. Gold ground is a "prepared surface" but sits on top and proclaims itself rather than lying underneath.

Gold grounds give way over the course of the fifteenth century to perspectival planes and landscape backgrounds, but the physicality of ground remains operative. While the background in Botticelli's *Annunciation* offers an illusionistic view outdoors (fig. I.2), this background is a crafted surface. The vertical orientation of the panel support guides and accentuates the crisp lines of the chiseled doorway. In opposition to the curving bodily contours of the figures, the background puts forward a concept of the line as a sharp edge. The white gesso ground is more than a mere preparatory layer; it contributes to the illusion of the white inlay below, perceived as near, and the clear sky above, perceived as far from, the viewer.

(LEFT)
Fig. I.2. Botticelli, *The Cestello Annunciation*, 1489–90. Tempera on panel (150 × 156 cm). Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

(RIGHT)
Fig. I.3. Caravaggio, *The Annunciation*, c. 1610. Oil on canvas (285 × 205 cm). Musée des Beaux-Arts, Nancy.

Finally, a feature of Baroque tenebrism is the darkened background (fig. I.3). In Caravaggio's *Annunciation*, the background "fades to black." The dark ground merges with the shadows, seeming to absorb the Virgin's bed, chair, and basket. The viewer's attention, instead of being drawn toward a single vanishing point inside the picture, is now pulled into the whole picture as if it were a vacuum. We could even say that the tenebrist background distributes the focus of perspective from a single point to the entire picture plane.

When confronted with this range of artworks, one wonders whether the conception of figure/ground as characterized above is capacious enough to grasp the numerous ways painters deployed the ground in their compositions. A question arises: is the terminology and method currently in use in art history able to account for the complexity of this fundamental pictorial element?[4] Let us consider the word "ground" itself, whose multiple meanings Matteo Burioni has mapped in his fundamental work on the concept. As a word with roots deep in the Anglo-Saxon and Germanic lexical past (*grundus*, *grunt*, *krunt*) and as part of our everyday vocabulary, "ground" bears a host of connotations that are adjacent and complementary to the word's art historical usage. In a physical sense, "ground" can mean "the lowest part or downward limit of anything," a foundation, substratum, or more simply, floor. Then, "ground" in a territorial sense indicates an enclosed portion of land, a delimited extent of property legally belonging to an owner. When traveling, "to cover a lot of ground" means to go far—and this traverse can also apply metaphorically to subject matter in a discussion. In theological contexts, fourteenth-century medieval mystics used "ground" to refer to the divine essence of being or the focal point of the soul where union with God transpires. "Ground" was also understood as the vernacular equivalent to classical terms that referred to the causes, reasons, and origins of things, such as *logos* (reason or word) and *archē* in Greek; *ratio*, *fundamentum*, and *principium* in Latin. Hence the appearance of "ground" in philosophical and literary contexts as "a circumstance on which an opinion, inference, statement, or claim is founded."[5] Ground has a broad horizon, traversing many domains, among them the pictorial, geological, legal, theological, and philosophical. But in art history our models of interpretation tend to be figurally driven, so that grounds often escape our attention. What would we discover if we displaced our customary focus to the area around, beneath, below, and behind the figure?

THREE GROUNDS

Having surveyed some uses of "ground" in the history of English, I would like to return to the two senses of "ground" as an art historical term and introduce a third element. As stated previously, the first "ground" is the material preparation of a planar support. We speak, for example, of "gesso ground," the layer of gypsum mixed with water that when applied to a panel, transforms it into a hard and smooth working surface. Such grounds become substrata as successive layers of paint bring the picture to completion. They are therefore often only readily visible in unfinished or damaged works of art. Yet this type of ground is primary, in that it primes or readies the support. Ground also participates in bounding the picture and, in doing so, prepares it to become a protagonist in cultural history. "Through the closure and smoothness of the prepared picture surface," Meyer Schapiro claimed, "the image acquired a definite space of its own," in contrast to prehistoric wall paintings, which had to "compete with the noise-like accidents and irregularities of a ground."[6]

"Ground" also refers to the platform or irregular terrain where figures place their feet in the world of the picture (as in our own). Bodies and objects in a picture need to be located somewhere, on a certain point on a plane—to speak in mathematical language—or in a particular setting or context that establishes their role in the world or in narrative.[7] Ground as plane is also fundamental for viewership: the viewer looking at the picture stands, most often, on a squared-off architectural ground. A painting's foreground mediates our entry into the picture, leading us to the middle ground, which contains the principal point or points of action in a composition. Ground as ground plane guides the viewer into the imaginative space of the picture; it is commonly asserted that it does this by "receding" into depth of space according to the laws of perspective. Yet there are ground surfaces, such as cracked, rocky, geological earth or meandering pools of water, which do not lend themselves to perspectival representation and which merit our attention. In Italian Renaissance art criticism, the ground plane in a picture is often referred to as *piano,* which also appears in musical terminology as a dynamic indication meaning "soft." In talking about what is inconspicuous, we must tread lightly and exercise acute looking and listening.[8]

Then, "ground" also designates the background, the field in and against which a picture's chief object of contemplation stands. In this sense, "ground" can refer to anything ranging from views in the distance to a darkened plane. Images that are more schematic reduce pictures to a dialogue between figure and ground. In the first decades of the twentieth century, Edgar Rubin and other psychologists explored the distinctions between the two in their experiments on human perception. Do we see, for instance, a face in profile or a vase?[9] This Gestalt example comes into use in the early twentieth century at the same time as experiments in painting by Henri Matisse or Pablo Picasso start to produce situations in which the figure/ground relation is reversed'. Yet the face/vase visual test can also be brought into connection with gold ground paintings, in which the background is often conceived as a flat monochrome, or with tenebrist paintings, in which the dark ground functions as a gap between forms. Even so, in Renaissance art literature, terms that will be discussed in chapter 1, such as *campo* (field) or *lontani* (views in the distance), denote a background that is understood as opposing or setting off the figure.

GROUNDWORK

These grounds constitute sites in the Renaissance picture where artists engage in what I propose to call *groundwork*. Conventionally, groundwork is understood as a base-level preparation or foundation, superseded in interest (though not significance) by that which is built on top; groundwork can also refer to the work entailed in constructing this foundation. I favor this second sense of the term. If work is an action that unfolds over time, then groundwork is best described as a process whereby materials are deposited in layers, figuration is disclosed or withdrawn, and meaning accrues, obtrudes, or dissipates. This multilateral and durational process of making and viewing implicates, in the sense of "folding in," the artist who paints and the beholder who sees, whereby the artist often doubles as the first viewer. Artists initially engage in the process of groundwork when they lay down the picture's material foundation and construct the represented plane and field on and against which figuration occurs. As the painting continues to develop, groundwork establishes the horizon of "the possible," a term I anchor in its two humanist senses, which will be explicated in further detail in chapter 2: first, the possible as *potere*, or power, the artist's capacity to handle and exploit the behavior and characteristics of the picture's inherent materiality; second, the possible as *potentia*, or potential, the capacity of the ground itself to erupt from the material substrate or from its subsidiary role to shape the terms of pictorial representation. Groundwork was one of the fundamental means by which artists conceptualized the stakes of the Renaissance picture, what it purported to do—as an object justifying itself and its conditions of possibility in relation to other media; and as a visual experience that enables deviating modes of thinking, imagining, and feeling. The picture offers implications that prepare its viewers to follow chains of metaphor in their own minds. Characteristic of groundwork is ultimately its capacity to subvert the very foundation that it purports to be, especially in those moments when it erupts to the surface. That which is oblique, latent, and suppressed can paradoxically become a driving factor behind what is portrayed, even when the artist's portrayal at first glance seems to disclose itself in a self-evident manner.

Artists' groundwork, therefore, *works* on the viewer, transferring a sense of semantic possibility from the multiple grounds of the picture to the self. Groundwork not only becomes an object of visual contemplation or historical inquiry but also forms the basis for a deeper hermeunetic engagement in the power and potential, as well as the limits and contingencies, of representation. Groundwork is what artists do. Groundwork is what art historians should take the time to see. This book therefore attempts to offer a critical language about ground's functions, definitions, permeable boundaries, and shades of meaning. This way of speaking about ground unlocks a deeper understanding of the Renaissance picture that seriously attends to its degrees of sedimentation: in other words, its profundity. I also propose, in deploying groundwork as a category worthy of historical investigation and theorization, that art history make more of an effort to recognize that which seems missing, removed, or depleted in its own field of study. While as an approach it is ostensibly formalist, groundwork agitates for a politics of visibility, a mode of attentive looking that, in the act of unearthing, recognizes the desire for that which is underfoot, often hidden in plain sight. The pressure of figuration (and therefore meaning) is released from the restrictive confines of the human body, allowing the currency of significance to be transferred and distributed throughout the picture.

This study, then, does not only undertake a historically contingent ontological hypothesis of painting, to define what it *is* in the period from 1400 to 1600, especially in Italy. I also want to ask how the ground dramatizes what painting aimed to be and to become. The ground marks the moment where the picture *begins*, by serving as painting's generating medium and point of departure. The beginning, as Aristotle claimed, is "the first thing from which something either exists or comes into being or becomes known" (*Metaphysics* 5.1013a). The ground as point of origin, then, establishes the principles of what can be or what can be known. In the case of art study, the ground must be recognized through close looking and not through intellection alone. This book indeed investigates the questions, "What is ground?" and "What does ground do?"; but beyond them, it aims to understand what the ground *wants* of the picture, in respect to its status as physical object, site of representation, and focus of critical reflection. Groundwork might additionally be defined as expressing itself in moments when the ground as material preparation, plane, and field makes its desire to assign its place in the picture both visible and known, felt, remembered.

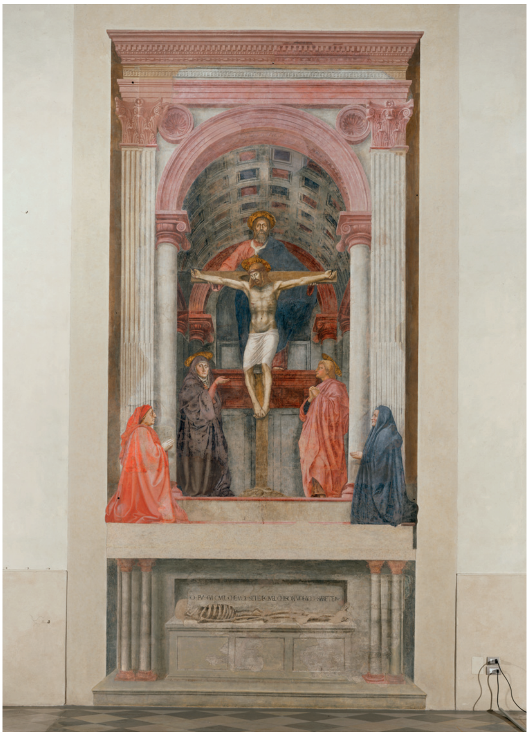
Thinking about groundwork generates insight that passes through the procedures of making and the ambitions of artistic representation to arrive at the critical issues of viewership and subjectivity. Erwin Panofsky famously claimed that the Renaissance perspectival picture, rather than showing an objective vision of reality, instead posited the viewing subject in a posture of reflexive self-awareness. As Margaret Iversen observes in her reading of Panofsky and his interlocutors, the perspectival picture signals "the relation of mind to things and [. . .] the nature of art as being essentially about that relation."[10] The beholder discovers a version of the self in and through the picture. The idea of groundwork advanced in this book pertains to the viewer's work of interpretation in pictures that are not strictly perspectival, and thereby posits a specific model of subjectivity that is neither authoritative, integral, and totalizing, on the one hand, nor fractured and discontinuous, on the other. Groundwork offers a model of viewership that begins at degree zero, starting from "that which lies beneath or behind," to understand narrative action and meaning. The beholder thinks in ablative terms, asking of the picture not only "Who?" or "When?" but also "Whence, where, under what circumstances, and by what means?" That is, in looking at the picture, the viewer as subject internalizes a sense of possibility. True, the picture is physically present. It is *there*. But the endeavors of looking and interpreting find something more. This excess is provided by the picture's viewers, who in finding that surplus in the image also find surplus in themselves.

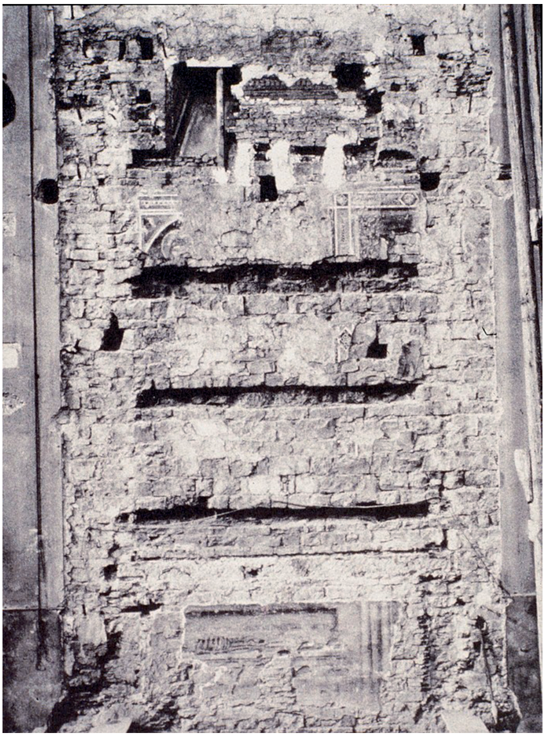
PERSPECTIVE VERSUS GROUND

How can we bring the ground into view—especially given that it is covered, to borrow a phrase from Leo Steinberg, by the "Cloud of Unseeing"? In addition to figure, another core art historical concept to which I have just alluded has also deflected our attention from the ground: namely, perspective. Far from disputing the significance of figure and perspective, my intention is to point out how consistently they have guided and, at times, distorted our understanding of the Renaissance picture and have encouraged us to focus on certain elements at the expense of others. We tend to look through, though not necessarily at, the Renaissance picture through the lens of perspective. Take the classic example of Masaccio's *Trinity*, once covered by an altarpiece by Vasari, and which itself covered previous fresco campaigns on a rough masonry wall (fig. I.4, 5). As the spiel goes, the ground, like the figures themselves, submits to a perspective with the effect that the flat planar wall dissolves, opening a view onto the chapel's interior. Never mind the inconvenient details that emphasize the fresco's material presence: the crisply delineated architectural ornament, the sweeping brushwork in Christ's shroud, or the haloes composed of gold leaf applied to gilt tin. The schematic diagrams we employ in teaching subsume the physical ground to the paradigm of perspective, in accordance with the analogy between the picture and "open window" that Leon Battista Alberti described in his treatise *On Painting* (1435).[11]

The so-called Albertian window itself is a gross generalization; Alberti's original "window" metaphor refers to the picture frame and does not intend to understand the image itself as extending beyond an invisible surface like a transparent glass pane. And yet, the metaphor of the Albertian window has behaved, as Joseph Masheck pointed out in a memorable observation, like an invasive species. "Clichés, like weeds, prove difficult to uproot," is the essay's first line. Erwin Panofsky's essay on perspective nourished this organism. Perspective, as he stated, transforms the picture into a window through which we look, so that "the material surface of the painting or relief is negated." To modernist painters who sought to emphasize the picture plane, the Albertian window represented the hegemony of the Renaissance and the failure of nineteenth-century historicism.[12] But the overly general equation of perspective with the Renaissance also had the effect of suppressing the multiple, varied, and evolving treatments of ground in the period under consideration in this book.[13]

There may be deeper reasons for this art historical occlusion. In the title to an essay, the literary critic Barbara Johnson asked, "Is Female to Male as Ground Is to Figure?" In the works of fiction that she analyzes, Johnson argues that women become represented as ground to the male figure, a relationship that culminates in the annihilation of the woman as





blank ground—she is erased, made to vanish, institutionalized. Johnson cites Douglas Hofstadter's notion of "recursive figuration," according to which the positions of figure and ground are mutable and dialogic. As Johnson quotes Hofstadter, a "cursively drawn figure is one whose ground is merely an accidental by-product of the drawing act," a negative space or "dead page." A "recursive figure," on the other hand, is "one whose ground can be seen as a figure in its own right." A ground can be seen as a figure; by the same token, every figure can also be perceived as a ground. Addressing issues of class and race, Johnson also acknowledges that there are "other figures trapped in the ground," unobserved within interpretive norms, while figure itself can be an internally differentiated and mutable category. Johnson is of course addressing a context radically different from ours. Her essay nonetheless calls attention to the practice by which oppositional binaries—be they male / female, figure / ground, white / black—structure and underline the systems of power at work in scholarly engagement with any topic.[14]

How can recursive figuration inform how we look at the Renaissance picture? The sources themselves challenge us to confront this question. In a well-known passage from Francisco de Holanda's *Da pintura antiga* (1548), Michelangelo is famously portrayed as giving priority to certain pictorial elements and regional styles over others. The painter declares that women, especially very old and very young women, naively appreciate Flemish painting with its interest in background elements such as "stuffs and masonry, the

(LEFT)
Fig. I.4. Masaccio, *Holy Trinity*, c. 1425. Fresco, postrestoration. Santa Maria Novella, Florence.

(RIGHT)
Fig. I.5. Detail view of the wall behind the *Holy Trinity* fresco, with fragment of Memento Mori. Santa Maria Novella, Florence.

green grass of the fields, the shadow of trees and rivers and bridges." These women, in his view, fail to appreciate the substance and vigor of the figure. In this recounted conversation, the divine master is portrayed as establishing a hierarchical relationship between figure and ground. He supports his views through recourse to analogies operating within a gendered, stylistic, regional framework. To formulate a rejoinder to "Michelangelo" is to reconfigure, disorient, and destabilize the set of asymmetrical and hierarchical relations between ground and figure. The result is a more holistic and complex account of the Renaissance picture, especially in Italy, in the tradition where the figure achieved the greatest prominence.[15]

ITALIAN BACKGROUNDS

While the prominence of figure and perspective have impeded a more integrated understanding of the picture as a whole, it is not the case that the ground has entirely eluded discussion. Not surprisingly, attention to the subject has come from unlikely quarters. For instance, one of the most perceptive comments was voiced by the American novelist Edith Wharton, who, though a friend of Bernard Berenson and well acquainted with the Old Masters, was by no means a professional art historian. In her travelogue *Italian Backgrounds* (1905), Wharton writes, "In the Italian devotional pictures of the early Renaissance, there are usually two quite unrelated parts: the foreground and background." The foreground, she says, is the place of the conventional, where we encounter the usual "saints, angels, and Holy Family." By contrast, "relegated to the middle distance, and reduced to insignificant size, is the real picture, the picture which had its birth in the artist's brain." Wharton ultimately employs the metaphor of foreground and background to make a distinction between the tourist site and the hidden destination, the casual sightseer and the informed traveler. Nonetheless, her observation that the background is where originality resides shows how the hierarchy that places figure over ground might be reversed and makes us rethink where we locate artistic individuality.[16]

Another not particularly well-known publication is a 1959 dissertation on the landscapes in the backgrounds of Leonardo's paintings, which was written by Eva Beuys-Wurmbach and published in 1974 with drawings executed by her husband, Joseph Beuys (fig. I.6). The purpose of the dissertation, as Beuys-Wurmbach put it, was to examine Leonardo's landscape backgrounds as a distinct entity in his paintings, and by so doing to provide an essential insight into his thinking as an artist. She suggests that in the *Mona Lisa*, for example, Leonardo strove to connect the figure and landscape, to create what she called a "living circuit inside the natural world." Backgrounds reinforce figural groupings and amplify their resonance in a larger spatial, or even spiritual, dimension. While this connection between figure and ground, microcosm and macrocosm, features prominently in the Leonardo literature, Beuys-Wurmbach's publication is noteworthy in illustrating it with graphic means. Beuys's drawings recall the illustrations in previous

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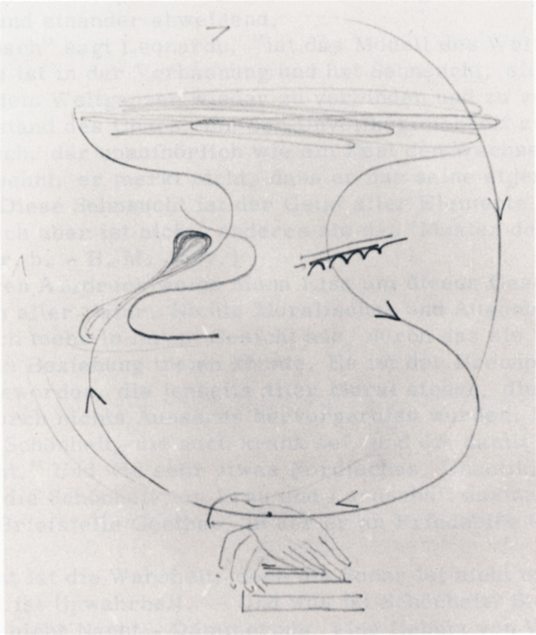
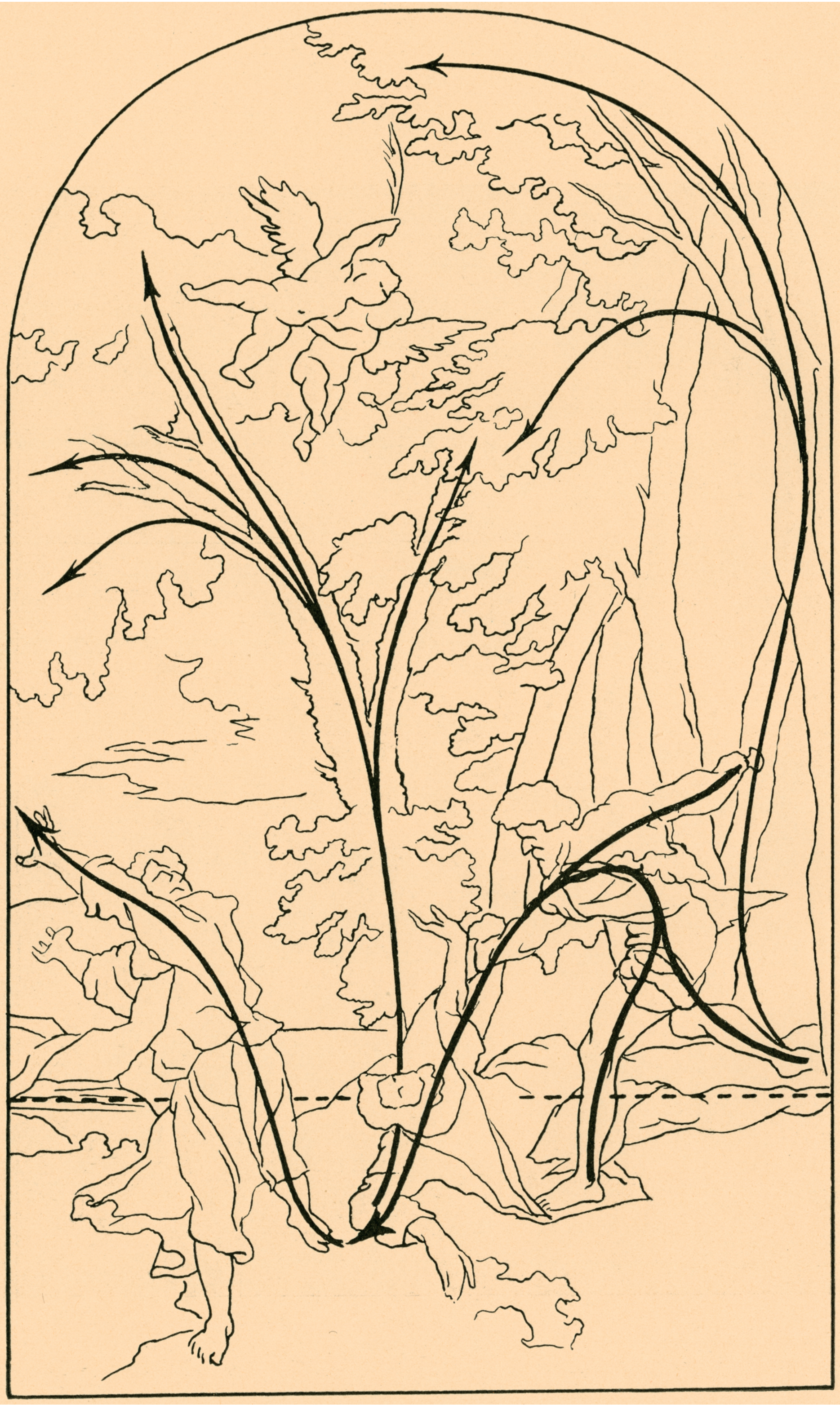
Fig. I.6. Joseph Beuys, drawing after the *Mona Lisa*. From Eva Beuys-Wurmbach, *Die Landschaften in den Hintergründen der Gamälde Leonardos*, 1977.

ander fort zum Bildrand strebenden Motive von Fluss und Weg. Im See des Hintergrundes und in der Frau findet der zwiespältige Mittelgrund sein Gleichgewicht. Und dabei scheint das Wasser, das nach vorne strömt in dem Flussbett, und das sich ja zu verwandeln vermag "in der Natur des Ortes, an dem es vorbeifliesst", in den Händen der Frau die Verwandlung vollzogen zu haben in die seltsame Form, die auch ein Blutstropfen sein könnte, der zurückfliesst in den See: Wasser, das nun rot und dickflüssig geworden ist.



In dieser Landschaft sind die Formen des Makrokosmos offene Zeichen für das Geschehen, das im menschlichen Mikrokosmos wirkt. Die Bewegung, die in den Organen der Welt geschieht, ist auch Bewegung der inneren Organe des Menschen und seiner Seelentätigkeit. Die Landschaft ist der Ausdruck des Psychischen, das in der Welt und in der Mona Lisa wirkt. Sie ist der Ausdruck der triebhaften Kräfte. Über den aufgerissenen Bergen liegt ein schwefliger Dunst. Leonardo sagt: "Der Sitz des triebhaften Lebens ist in der Glut, die an verschiedenen Stellen der Erde ausströmt, nämlich in Schwefelgruben und anderen Orten." (Leic. 34r.)

Das Porträt und die Landschaft gehen über alles Individuelle hinaus, sie sind Symbol geworden. Über Beiden liegt die Unwirklichkeit des Traumhaften. Und will man den Traum endlich als eine Wirkung tiefster Organfunktionen annehmen, so sind beide der Ausdruck



Germanophone art scholarship, such as Joseph Gramm's *Die ideale Landschaft* (fig. I.7). These diagrams make explicit through arrows and dotted lines how figures extend their action beyond the body into the landscape, and vice versa: how landscape shapes figural composition.[17]

The ground as a focus of inquiry has also received attention in recent art historical scholarship on the early modern period. While I engage with their specific points of argument throughout the book, several key contributions deserve brief mention here, if only to expose the historiographic foundation on which this project aims to build. Given that this examination considers ground as a discursive bridge linking art practice and art theory, Jeroen Stumpel's 1998 essay "On Grounds and Backgrounds: Some Remarks about Composition in Renaissance Painting" is germinal. There, he demonstrates that what we in English call the "ground" or "background" appears in sources as a different term, namely *campo* (field or open plane), whose period meanings and connotations I discuss in chapter 1. Stumpel's philological approach was taken up by Thomas Puttfarken in *The Discovery of Pictorial Composition* (2000), where he sees the Renaissance picture as primarily interested in *rilievo* (relief), the projection of the figure from the surrounding ground in service to intelligible narrative. Complicating this dyadic notion of figure/ground is *Der Grund. Das Feld des Sichtbaren* (2012), a landmark publication edited by Gottfried Boehm and Matteo Burioni. Although beginning from an art historical perspective (and specifically Stumpel's essay on campo), the editors bring together contributions that explore how ground works as an operative concept in literature, philosophy, theater, geography, and calligraphy. What allows the volume to embrace such a diverse range of fields, the editors acknowledge, is the particular *Sprachzauber* (literally, "word-magic") the word *Grund* carries in the German language. As previously mentioned, "ground" was the English vernacular equivalent of classical philosophical terms for reasoning, foundation, and beginning. Hence there are also numerous German words based on the lexical unit *Grund* that refer to justifying (*begruenden*), fathoming (*ergruenden*), substantiating claims (*zugruenden legen*). Without ground (*grundlos*), you fall into an abyss (*Abgrund*). It is fitting that one of the foundational texts of art history, by Heinrich Wölfflin is entitled *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, specifying literally the "ground concepts" of art history.[18]

As Boehm and Burioni see it, this panoply of cognates invites consideration of the ground as a dynamic entity, as both physical substrate and process. The availability of terms in a given language underscores interpretive possibilities and limitations. In his essay, Lothar Ledderose notes that in French, English, or German one might speak of the "ground becoming background" in a landscape by Cézanne, to describe how the canvas becomes part of the view through a forest (fig. I.8). Ledderose argues, however, that this notion of ground as background would be questionable in Chinese art theory. To be sure, *Six Persimmons* by the thirteenth-century painter Muxi may seem to exemplify an interest in ground as background (fig. I.9); but

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Fig. I.7. Karl Hofner, diagram of Titian's *Death of Saint Peter Martyr*. From Josef Gramm, *Die ideale Landschaft: ihre Entstehung und Entwicklung*, 1912.

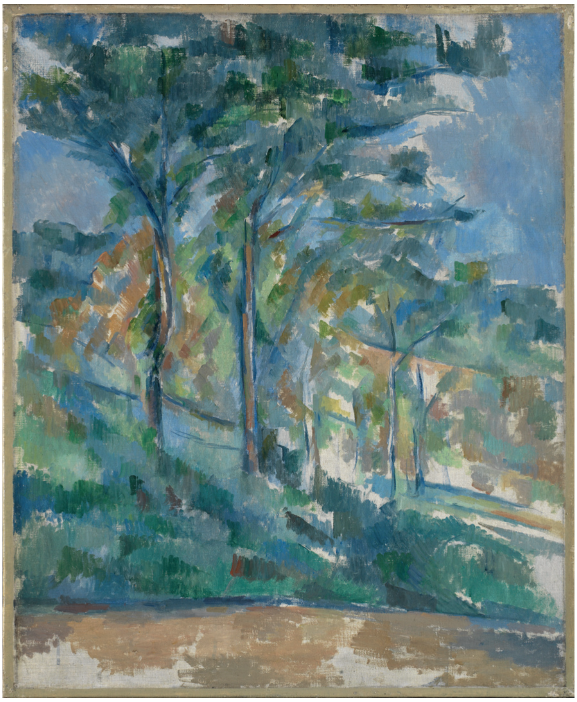

Fig. I.8. Paul Cézanne, *Landscape: The Forest Clearing*, c. 1900–1904. Oil on canvas (62.2 × 51.5 cm). Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

it is doubtful whether contemporary viewers would have described the areas where the ground comes through the body of the fruit as a deliberate conflation. Instead, discussions would emphasize the subtle gradations of ink tonalities, the brushwork delineating the stems, and spatial intervals.[19]

Beyond the particularities of a given idiom, the larger issue is that of how words relate to pictures. Pictures fade when words end. We see what we say. Or put more accurately, we see what has already been said: it is harder to see that for which no words yet exist. Therefore, we need more than the lexicon of present-day art history to conjure the ground. We also need to dig through the historical bedrock of campo to extract and lay bare the assumptions implicit in the term's use. As we might expect, these assumptions shape our expectations for how the Renaissance picture ought to look, and even more intriguingly, how the Renaissance picture can look.

CHAPTER OVERVIEWS

This book narrates and explains how the picture works through the ground, or how art is *groundwrought*, to restitute a now obsolete form of the word, in a broad sweep of the early modern period with especial focus on Italy. Even though grounds are largely taken for granted, we intuitively use them, just below the surface of observation, to register shifts in Renaissance painting. Over the course of the fifteenth century, gold grounds give way to perspectival and landscape views; in turn, these grounds darken and disappear in the chiar-

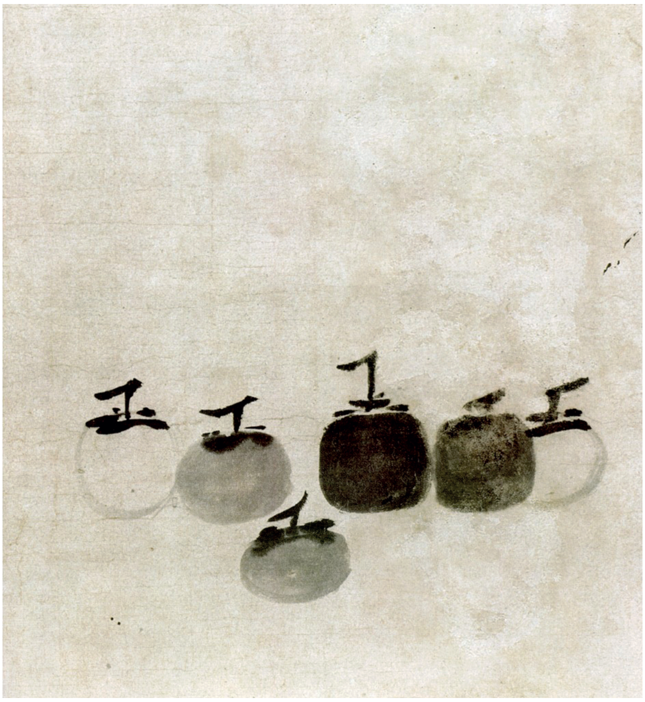

Fig. I.9. Muxi, *Six Persimmons*, mid-thirteenth century. Ink on paper (36.2 × 38.1 cm). Daitoku-ji, Kyoto.

oscuro painting of the late sixteenth century. This book broadly interrogates these shifts and attends to the divergences, inversions, and interruptions in art theory and art historiography proper.

Chapter 1 ("Words for Grounds") elaborates on the three semantic fields pertaining to the word "ground": ground as material support; ground as terrain or platform; and ground as background. In addition to conducting a philological examination of the early modern terms for these grounds as described in primary sources, I examine a series of paintings for how grounds inform their coloration and compositional structure and shape their meaning. Here I take into account what Stephen Campbell has described as "the relationship between representation and physical reality"—how paintings function as "objects in the world as well as evocations of the world." Indeed, as Jodi Cranston observes in relation to the materiality of Titian's late paintings, "the unprecedented role given to the depicted ground, the actual canvas ground, and the compromised figure contributes to and challenges the self-sufficient status of the figure and artist."[20] The set of material and conceptual tensions embodied by the ground can be located in origin myths of painting that discover figuration in murky clay, the surface of water, patterns in rocks, and shadows on walls. Following the philosopher Hans Blumenberg, I draw upon these and other myths especially for the way that they engage with "absolute reality," forces in nature that are felt to be beyond human control, resistance, or articulation. Myths, as archives of that which remains hidden or unknown, seem particularly well suited as analytic implements in approaching the ground as a field inhabited by unspoken or unacknowledged forces.

The remaining four parts of the book explore how artists posited differing conceptions of ground, often in meaningful dialogue with one another. Chapter 2 (“Possibility”) discusses the process and meaning of gold ground in Cennino Cennini’s *Libro dell’arte* (c. 1390) and Gentile da Fabriano’s *Madonna and Child with Angels* (c. 1405), with focus placed on the technique of granulation (*opus punctorium*). Gold ground functions not simply as a structural analogy with divine line and expansive space, as art historians in the early twentieth century often reiterated. Artists exploited the malleability of gold, its capacity to be hammered into thin sheets, so as to render gold ground an area in the picture that demands the work of detailed and focused looking, ultimately placing figure and ground in complementary, even competing, positions. In its two modalities as a chromatically varied, illuminated plane that, according to the viewer’s standpoint, can be seen to contain delineated forms, gold ground demonstrates a basic condition of ground in general.

Chapter 3 (“Metamorphosis”) explores the transition from gold ground to landscape views in early Renaissance painting. Focus is placed on Giovanni Bellini’s *Saint Francis in the Desert* (c. 1480), in particular the use of geological forms to structure the relationship between the figure of the saint, his withdrawal to the hermetic retreat in the wilderness, and the view of the city beyond. Bellini dramatizes different properties of ground through the geological forms of mountain, rock face, cave, and liquefied rock, which shift between background, stratified plane, and unstable foundation. These forms are associated with painting itself as stratified, fissured, liquid, and solid. Just as Francis’s stigmata serve as a primordial imprint, the crack in the rock face can be thought of as the original line as it is spontaneously found in nature. Given its formal and semantic import, the crack might even be considered the *Pathosformel* of the earth—the expression of the ground’s dynamic movement. In thus alluding to an earthquake, the panel connects La Verna with the Holy Land and characterizes Francis as Adam, the primordial human figure fashioned from the ground. Bellini’s depiction of Francis’s open mouth, about to speak or sing, bears analogy with the cave, an aperture in the rock face that opens up the possibility of descent into the earth.

In chapter 4 (“Articulation,”) the discussion moves indoors toward examining the condition of painting’s background as wall, the elevation of an architectural interior. The chapter examines the portraiture of Giovanni Battista Moroni through his sitters’ relationship with chromatic fields of gray that function as backdrops. Rather than seeing his portraits as unmediated, naturalistic depictions of their subjects, as art historians previously have done, I argue that Moroni’s figures and their gray walls enter into an exchange that moves between articulation and concealment of affect. While Moroni’s sitters appear stoic and inscrutable, the artist displaces attributes of their inner life to the wall, such that the portraits constitute images of figured walls or walled figures. Meanwhile, the contrast between pink flesh and gray stone in these portraits alludes to the polychromy in landmarks local to Moroni's sitters, a relation that transforms these portraits into painted monuments. It can be concluded that Moroni's figures are products of their grounds and exist in an (interrupted) exchange with these grounds.

From the gray ground of the wall and the backdrop of the sixteenth-century city-state, the discussion returns, in chapter 5 ("Transumption"), to the darkened chambers of the primordial cave, while advancing to the tenebrism of late Renaissance painting. In works by Caravaggio, the scene appears to be set in a darkened interior so that figures and objects can only be identified by their illuminated fragments. The correlation of obscurity with a hidden though tangible presence is central to the critical reception of Caravaggio. Therefore, the chapter opens with close readings of ancient and early modern texts that associate the mythological figure of Echo with the primal site of the cave and its darkness. As Baroque poet Giambattista Marino phrased it, Echo is an "invisible image," continually present despite being obscured. The criticism of blackness, which appears as a lexical echo in period accounts of Caravaggio's paintings, alludes to the artist's emendation of the Renaissance idealized figure, a breaking apart of form reminiscent of Echo's fragmentation of utterance. Following the poet and critic John Hollander's understanding of transumption as an echo that occurs in spite of, or because of, repression, I also argue that Caravaggio's darkened grounds allude to the previous grounds that they obscure.

This study works through the force of critical examples, seeing how they bear strategic importance for the larger representational issues the ground implicates. The case studies invite readers to participate in intense observation and to generate a different narrative of the Italian Renaissance picture for themselves. An entire book devoted to the ground—to that which stands below, behind, or tangential to the chief object of contemplation—may seem nugatory. At the same time, a *complete* history of the ground in Renaissance art would require attention to areas beyond the Italian peninsula, especially in regions north of the Alps where painters such as Jan van Eyck or Pieter Bruegel the Elder made thorough investigations of ground.[21] Even so, as Daniel Arasse said of the detail, the ground likewise "constitutes an efficient touchstone to perceive the stakes of much larger historical links and aesthetic choices." Or as Friedrich Nietzsche aphoristically stated, for the scholar, "not that which glitters, shines, excites but often insignificant seeming truth is the fruit which he knows how to shake down from the tree of knowledge."[22]

A NOTE ON METHOD: FORMALISM AND HISTORY

Groundwork undoes the hierarchical binary of figure/ground by showing how each passes into and imparts characteristics to the other, making visible what Nicola Suthor has called "anomalies of depiction, the so-called language of the painter."[23] As a method, groundwork oscillates among different areas of art historical inquiry: the artist's workshop practice, material processes, and technique as can be gleaned from conservation reports and through close looking; the role of ground plane and background in depiction, especially in its relation to the figure as well as to narrative; and finally, the manifestation or occlusion of ground and background in period art theoretical commentary. This body of writing is analyzed especially in regard to its potential to make a complex argument about ground's role in art historical teleology and sequencing from gold ground painting to tenebrism.

In moving between these areas, this book takes an approach to image and text that could be called—or indicted as—"formalist." This word carries connotations of nefariousness. Scholarship in the humanities tends to impute to a method that places greatest emphasis on artefacts themselves a politics of containment and exclusion that is reactionary.[24] However, in the North American context, the association of formalism with a conservative political stance can be argued to have had more to do more with the political climate during the Cold War, when formalist readings became prevalent, than with the actual political agendas of contemporary critics interested in form. Meanwhile, humanist scholarship tends to associate with progressive liberal politics a method that treats artefacts as enmeshed in social contexts and dependent on historical circumstances, and for that reason grants as much attention to these contexts and circumstances as to the artefacts themselves. And yet, an academic obsession with dismantling formal containers—the nation-state, the relegated domestic sphere, or the penal system—has done little to disrupt the operation of such forms in social life.[25] In some quarters of the academy, this interest in "socially" progressive art history has even given rise to the expectation that scholars ought directly to reflect aspects of a marginal identity in their scholarship and professional person. Art historians of color, for example, are somehow expected to address their race and ethnicity in ways that are immediately recognizable, categorizable, and consumable. It remains an open question whether such assumptions contribute as much toward ensuring that the said scholars "stay in their lanes" as toward showcasing a (possibly rather superficial) level of "diversity," "equity," and "inclusion."[26] Let us ponder for a moment the formalism of the "lanes" or "fields" which structure the research and teaching in art historical departments: while professing to be antiformalists, some scholars have erected new restrictive forms that have the effect of sealing subdisciplines within given identities. White Euro-American scholars themselves, it should be said, rarely come up against these pernicious underlying assumptions.

In her book *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (2015), Caroline Levine convincingly argues that while overtly social and political approaches postulate a cause-and-effect relationship between milieu and work, the artwork is always already present and is not an immediately direct effect of the social.[27] In lieu of using the work of art primarily as a point of departure to excavate the social conditions related to its patronage, creative inception, and production, I place emphasis first on paintings' formal qualities and prefatory processes of making, not in search of ideal wholes or integral forms, but rather on the trail of tensions and complexities in figural contour and arrangement, texture and tonal value of brushwork, and the conjunctions and (especially) disjunctions in a composition that hold the viewer in suspense. The internalizing of groundwork's possibility does make the social dimensions of the artwork significant, though only through the initial step of attentive looking. That is to say, when the viewer once stops to grasp groundwork's interpretive possibilities, the social dimensions of form (here understood as including ground) then become necessary for an enriched experience of the painting. The artwork may not be a direct effect of context. Even so, it presents its significance as inextricable from the residue of the "social"—the entire lived and material world, now partly inaccessible, which surrounded the circumstances of its making.

Consequently, to render into prose the dissonant complexities of figure and ground in the Renaissance picture, this book engages with Renaissance art criticism to anchor theoretically its thesis about how the pictorial ground formulates certain models of sense-making within a historically specific social realm. Attentiveness to the dynamic use of figures of speech, imagery, and narrative devices in biographies and treatises contributes to a shift in art historical method, from a data- or concept-driven analysis based on the single lexical or semantic unit to a more process-oriented mode of close reading. Equally revealing is when these texts pass over and write around the ground, leaving gaping ellipses or blanks in the texture of their prose. The bringing of these texts more holistically into dialogue with the paintings enables a greater permeability between text and image, with the effect of an intermedial transfer of analytic devices. Language can certainly be "a conspiracy against experience," as Michael Baxandall famously claimed in *Giotto and the Orators* (1971). Yet as Baxandall's own preoccupation with language as analytical scaffolding demonstrates, careful description of an artwork deepens and refines that experience, while also providing an occasion to interrogate and historicize the very linguistic medium of art historical inquiry.[28]

Hence, my use of visual and verbal formalisms does not aspire to impose wholeness and unity, or aim to inhibit interference or rupture. Meanwhile, interrupting the encroachment of social context onto an artwork's form can paradoxically open up a larger network of referents. The groundwork of the Renaissance picture addresses, models, or comprises an experimental field wherein an awareness of historically specific compositional processes resolves into comprehension of the social domain. Much Renaissance scholarship on the social function of the image speaks to the constructed or fashioned nature of representation. Yet while intending to address the image overall, analyses that point out the constructed nature of representation privilege the figure, and thereby understand the construct of the image through analogy with the figure. An approach to the image from the viewpoint of ground replaces constructedness with contingency. The "look" onto the image is enriched with the awareness that painting does not necessarily posit the figure as autonomous—in fact, the very attempt at self-constitution necessarily always fails when we acknowledge the image's seams and ruptures. Instead, groundwork as a method conceives the figure and figuration through their interdependency with the ground. In turn, the groundedness of the figure provides a theoretical frame to direct our attention to the "peripheral" and the transitive properties of bodies and their locations; to include not only the *who*, but also the *where*.

This book, then, aims to tell the "deep story" of the picture, one that is often occluded but that is fundamental to the picture's very existence and necessary for its comprehensive understanding. Ever since Vasari's germinal work, the ground has, in varying degrees, emerged into, disappeared from, and then reappeared in art historical descriptions. As Christopher Wood observes in his account of the history of art history, Alois Riegl would identify the interchangeability between figure and ground, and therefore the interruption of the distinctions between the two, as constituting "the template of the modern Western artwork." In this new artefact, figure and ground exist in a fluid exchange, permitting the artefact "as a whole to cohere and detach itself from the rest of the world, as if the work itself were now a figure set off against the ground of life."[29] However, it is not the aim of this study to see ground in the Renaissance picture in teleological terms, as a preliminary, if foundational, step toward modernist arguments concerning flatness or the perception of depth in painting, painting as a layered structure and foldable surface, or the dissolution of figure/ground oppositions.[30] While the figure/ground distinctions can be undone, ground endures as a constant variable in the conditions of what defines painting as a medium.[31] As Toni Morrison reminds us, paraphrasing A. S. Byatt, the ground was always there, "[we] knew it was always there, and have always known it was as it was, though we have now for the first time recognized, become fully cognizant of, our knowledge." Morrison applies Byatt's observation in her study on the invisibility of Black presence in criticism. As she states, "it requires hard work not to see."[32] Aside from recuperating the ground as a category that merits critical examination, I am also intent on grasping the dilemma of its exception in our current models of art theoretical interpretation. What does it mean to exist as something so present as to escape notice but also so peripheral as to escape attention?

The figure/ground distinction can be undone and yet endures over time. In identifying groundwork as a blind spot in art historical analysis, this book also represents a divergent approach to certain assumptions concerning chronology and progression that are prevalent in the discipline referred to as "art history." On one hand, the narrative of these chapters seems to follow, even underscore, a progression of the compositional operations undergirding the Italian Renaissance picture, from gold ground in the Trecento to the darkness in tenebrist painting circa 1600 and beyond. Yet in tracking these shifts, I am less interested in imputing these visible changes in the picture to external causes and forces. It is not my view that the "rise of science" accounts wholly for the emergence of landscape, or that "skepticism" explains dark grounds.[33] I argue that the apparent modalities of ground actually inform and absorb or subsume, rather than replace, one another. Gold ground, while seemingly discarded in the Renaissance due to the increased valuing of mimetic skill over material application, continued to inform groundwork. Chiaroscuro and tenebrist paintings depend, as does gold ground, on the tension between nearness and distance to engineer their aesthetic and narrative effects. Impasto brushwork, which activates the materiality of the canvas support, has much to do with the convention of tessellated surfaces in mosaics. The historical orientation of this book, in other words, seeks not only to present a history of ground as ever present, but also to give value to the temporally dissonant juxtapositions that ground evokes.

History is thus pursued through excavation, through an attempted return to the origins of picture making deep within the physical picture itself, through the stratified layers of paint that sit above the prepared support.[34] Strangely enough, the deeper we penetrate and the closer we come to the "ground zero" of painting, the stranger the view on and into the artwork becomes. There is nothing more afigural or anticipatory than a joined panel or blank canvas awaiting the application of the material ground. The power of ground lies in its material, mimetic, and interpretive potential: to find history inside the picture, within its depths.

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