Revisions

Notes

Working Document 2017 – *ongoing* E. Jackson

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Fresco and Material Time – *painting as multiple strata composite*

Verdaccio is an underpainting technique and specific paint colour – a soft green-grey. In Renaissance frescoes, verdaccio was used to create single colour underpaintings, where chromatically it supported the overpainting of pink flesh tones. Left visible in some architectural features, the verdaccio underpainting occupies both a structural and sub-structural role in the composition. The origins of green underpainting pre-date the renaissance – green earth (a pigment made from natural minerals, also known as terre verte and Verona green) was used widely by medieval artists as a preliminary paint layer for pink skin tones.

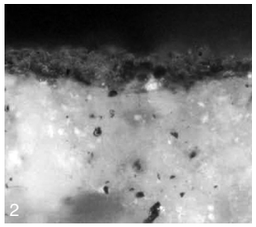
Sinopia, a dark reddish-brown earth pigment, is a traditional colouring matter used for preparatory paintings and underdrawings. Other descriptors for the colour include red ochre, Venetian red, Spanish red, ocra rosso, terra di Sienna – all describe iron oxide, an earth pigment with ancient precedents. The first pigments used by early humans were ochres, and iron is the principle ingredient of all of them. The temporal register of the colour source shifts dramatically in this context – it is both foundational and fundamental.

I would like to claim that both fresco and underpainting techniques generate a withheld surface, and it is this witholding that sets up an oscillation between surface and substrate. The relationship between painting and ground is made indistinct through a process of absorption and submersion.

Embedded physically in a cave, crypt or place of worship, frescoes have a material weight that contradicts their status as image surface. Perhaps this is why their study and conservation is steeped in the language of archaeology and geology – excavation, mapping textures, sample fragments, mineralogical techniques.

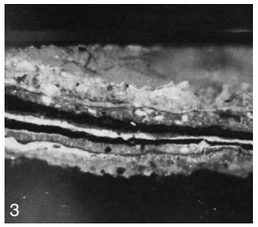
The durational characteristics of fresco are both numerous and complex. Materially, pigments are bonded into the matrix of the plaster offering long-term durability. In the short-term, technically they involve speed and precision – as Vasari noted in his Lives of the Artists (1568), *"painting on the wall is the most masterly and beautiful, because it consists in doing in a single day that which, in the other methods, may be retouched day after day, over the work already done."* The temporal layers of fresco occupy multiple dimensions, where vertical seams and joins on the wall demarcate daily sections; and, on the horizontal plane, multiple layers contain the evidence of earlier paintings – preparatory images, restorations, workings and revisions.

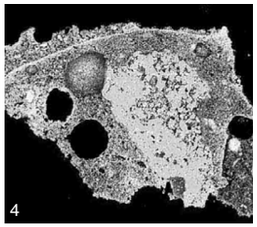
The idea of a painting as multiple strata composite, resonates with the techniques of transparent oil painting – as Sylvana Barrett and Dusan C. Stulik (Getty Conservation Institute) comment on the Flemish and early Netherlandish masters, *"These artists conceived of the painting from its inception as a multilayered object with a structural separation of color and form. Volume, developed through highlights and shadows in a monochromatic underpainting, was followed by color embellishments."* Here, conservation and technical art-historical analysis subjects the multi-layered object to macroscopic scrutiny in search of meaning, insight and authentication – insubstantial layers thick with data.



1 Frescos under the Papal Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore, Rome, 1-5 A.D.

2 Cross section of fresco – showing charcoal black inclusions within the plaster substrate





3 Photomicrograph of paint sample – shows complex structure representing several repaintings

4 SEM image of a fresco – shows distinct textures and and continuous calcite layer

Portraits and Identity – *from stone head to no-self*

Traditionally, portraits have been described as recording the human face and immortalising the subject; they have also, in various ways, worked with idealisation, symbolic representation and other abstract constructs of identity. Roman portrait sculptures were used to commemorate distinguished ancestors and to establish the authority of imperial dynasties through a continuity of likeness. For Western culture since antiquity, the head has been the dominant symbolic part of the body signifying intellect, selfdom and the seat of the soul.

Portrait busts in someway provide a concrete space for these intangible attributes, their form a space of unknown interior mass. In contrast, painted portraits operate through multiplex flattening – form, expression and character reduced to a single surface. The history of portraiture is marked by a negotiation between multiple attributes and competing paradigms: identification and inner essence, status and individual selfhood, reality and idealisation.

The face is a carrier of emotional and psychological expression. In a death mask it is a blank – as a direct physical imprint, it is the closest approximation of a subject's face. Impassive, no modelling of expression, eyes closed – in every way the technical aspirations of portrait sculpture, namely liveliness, are negated by the dead subject. By naming this exact portrait a 'mask', it becomes a dead object. If we were to compare a death mask with a portrait bust where the eyes are similarly closed, we read the subject of the bust as asleep or in some other interior state. In the death mask, the inexpressive surface appears to lead nowhere; whereas, the physical volume of the sculpted head imbues the facial expression with a space of retreat.

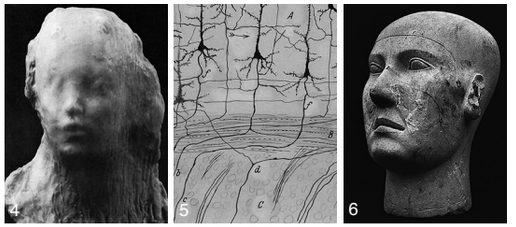
1 Head of Augustus, 27 B.C.-14 A.D., faience

2 Mme Derain by Charles Despiau,1922, bronze

3 Death mask of Napoleon Bonaparte, plaster-of-Paris cast copy

Portrait sculptures have also been used as surrogate heads, votive objects, tomb ornaments and reliquaries – features fixed in stone, earth, wax or metal. This fixing of the human head into matter is a material transcription of an exterior form. Alongside the historical oscillation between likeness and idealisation the introduction of psychological expression became an important stylistic element. This move seems to correspond to the evolution of rulers from warriors to philosophers – the thinking philosopher-emperor depicted as brow-knotted, aged and lined, with each carved furrow representing a physical trace of concern and intellect. Initially innovative, the stylistic motifs used to portray the subject's mind became another convention of the genre – individual characteristic into archetype, expression into symbolic representation.

In the portrait of a thinking subject the head contains and conceals. Any external facial expression is a vague descriptor of the complex interior aspects of the human skull – such as, personal identity and the constructs of conscious selfhood (language and memory). The cranial vault is both a physical repository and metaphysical space. In this ephemeral fluid site, any notion of a fixed identity – if we consider the philosophy of David Hume, and Buddism – is dissolved by impermanence. In both these philosophies an idea of no-self is grounded in the constantly changing nature of experience. For Hume the self is a collection of variable perceptions and impressions – within this flux and diversity there can be no identity. In Buddist philosophy humans are an aggregate of changing dynamic processes (the five Skandhas): form/matter, sensation, perception, mental formation and consciousness. Here, the solidity of any constructed self-image is atomised by the multiplicity of being.



4 Ecce Puer by Medardo Rosso, 1906, plaster, gesso

5 Brain Drawings, Santiago Ramón y Cajal, 1899, ink

6 Reserve Head, Giza tomb, circa 2551-2496 B.C., limestone

Figures and Backgrounds – *the immeasurable boundary line*

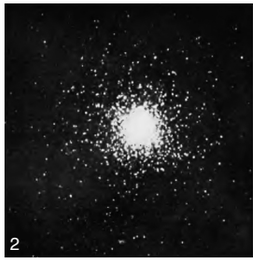
One of the principles of gestalt psychology is the figure-ground relationship, it describes how perceptual recognition separates objects from backgrounds. This division happens at a boundary, where the edge of the figure distinguishes itself from the ground. References to this primary feature of perception are found in the writings of painters, philosophers, psychologists, phenomenologists, mathematicians, and other scholars of visual experience and cognition.

In his book *Point and Line to Plane*, Kandinsky develops a theory of composition through a series of geometrical, visual, and spiritual concepts. He writes, *"The point can grow and cover the entire ground plane unnoticed – then, where would the boundary between point and plane be?"* The question is practical and theoretical, and in the context of Kandinsky's schema he offers aesthetic examples using pedagogic reasoning and personal experience to formulate conclusions. The philosopher Charles S. Peirce, (writing in *The Logic of Quantity*) approaches the figure-ground relation through a complex examination of the boundary line. He begins, *"A drop of ink has fallen upon the paper. There is a line of demarcation between the black and the white. Now I ask about the points of this line, are they black or white?"* For Peirce, the colour of the dividing line between the black ink-blot and its white background becomes an exploration of uninterrupted surfaces, continuity-breaches and boundary properties.

Peirce's thoughts about continuum and demarcation lines are investigated further by the contemporary philosopher of mathematics Fernando Zalamea, who adds more complexity to the ink-blot boundary line in his description, *"around an actual mark on the continuous line stands a supermultitudinous myriad of infinitesimals."* The philosophers' ink-spot and the reasoning that reduces its edge to an undifferentiated entity is one way of taking a boundary apart. Another description that philosophers have proposed is, the boundary as a series of thin layers with fewer dimensions than the bodies they bound. In these accounts the boundary is atomised and multiplex, undergoes disintegration and collapses into uncertainty; and, as Wittgenstein observes, *"an indefinite boundary is not really a boundary at all."* The indefinite boundary suggests the formless, amorphous and nebulous – here, the contour is not a division between two things but an indeterminate area of interrelation.

The figure background relation is examined in Merleau-Ponty's *Phenenomology of Perception*. In one section of the text he uses an example of a red patch on a homogeneous background, and notes, *"My gaze does not merge with the outline or the patch as it does with the redness considered concretely: it ranges over and dominates them."* For Merleau-Ponty, it is the embodied viewing subject that inhabits the figure and imbues the coloured patch with representational meaning and significance – here the boundary exists in sensation.

In these examples the boundary between figure and ground is open to question; it is myriad, thin-layered, both perceptible and hypothetical. The boundary is always relative, as Alan Sidelle characterises in his paper *Rigidity, ontology, and semantic structure*, *"The world is capable of being cut up in so many ways, and whenever we consider such a cut (some principle of individuation), we are considering the world cut that way, i.e., so articulated."* In this context thresholds become a matter of consciousness, attention and awareness, and we can choose to disregard the sharply delineated figure in preference for the undifferentiated background.



1 Illustration from article, *Perception: An Introduction to the Gestalt-theorie,* Kurt Koffka, 1922

2 Star cluster of Hercules, photographic illustration from *Point and Line to Plane,* Wassily Kandinsky, 1926

Vanishing Points and Horizons – *the optical pull of perspective*

In mathematics a point is a fixed location, a dot without dimension – the vanishing points of linear perspective conform to this principle. Linear perspective provides a geometric framework for constructing an image with spatial attributes on a flat surface. Historically, perspective in pictorial art evolves from the study of optics. Using these early scientific and mathematical theories, artists formulated structures for composition to create images with the illusion of depth. Features of visual experience such as converging parallel lines, changes in scale, and foreshortening were used by Renaissance painters to fabricate volume, space and recession in their work; and to structure visual narratives and direct the viewer's attention.

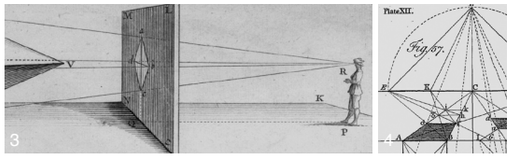
European perspectival art conforms to a field of view constructed from a point (the eye) and lines of light (visual rays), where sight dominates the organising structure. A form of immaterial sensing, vision is considered the primary sense for directly knowing the world. Numerous metaphors about truth, light and discovery equate knowledge with seeing, and these ideas are woven into the fabric of linear perspective. The primacy of vision was central to Renaissance thought and during this time, other conceptual and symbolic pictorial systems were displaced.

The measurable clarity associated with linear perspective is achieved by the assumption of a static observer. By limiting the vantage point and forgoing experiential complexity the construction of deep pictorial space proceeds methodically. The single viewing position is fixed by a vanishing point placed on a horizon line, where the whole perspective construct pivots on its axis generating spatial dimension in the painting. A matrix of sight lines converge on the horizon as the space is pulled toward a distant focal point. The horizon line represents objects infinitely far away, reducing things in the distance to the infinitesimal. Here, three-dimensional remote space dwells in a line with zero width and zero height – an abstract, philosophical line is found hiding in a representational painting. Perhaps this horizon line with its extensive magnitudes, embedded vanishing points and infinitesimal objects, holds all the potential environments excluded from the static illusionistic space of linear perspective.

The limitations of a geometric representation of visual space are emphasised by Gaston Bachelard in his writing on the phenomenology of roundness, *"…it is evident that when a geometrician speaks of volumes, he is only dealing with the surfaces that limit them. The geometrician's sphere is an empty one."* In phenomenology, visual experience and perspective is wholly embodied and mobile – horizons and viewpoints shift. This movement adds time to the sense of sight, where points and lines fluctuate and flow, and the focal axis of the visual field is always unfixed. This active space transforms lines and points into impressions, trails and residues – event-based entities with duration, velocity and motion. An example of a point and line event could be a comet and its tail, a moving nucleus and apparent band of luminous particulate matter. When observing this phenomena vision fails to register a distinct mass, and moving particles are compressed into a dynamic line. These perceptual limits are generative, and the transient line of a moving point opens a space to think about blur.

Thought about temporally, lines become a passage both held in and by the movement of points – their trajectory a gesture between locations. The visual field seems choreographed, a performative space synonymous with critic Marcia Siegel's description of dance as 'a perpetual vanishing point'. Here, for the observer, all action is a flow in time – a disappearance.

1 Detail of *Four Scenes from the Early Life of Saint Zenobius*, Sandro Botticelli, 1500, tempera on wood
2 Detail of a drawing, Hans Vredeman de Vries, 1604



3 Detail of perspective diagram, Jean François Nicéron, 1663
4 Detail of perspective diagram, Thomas Malton, 1775

Revisions