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*Crossing Aesthetics*

Werner Hamacher  
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*Editors*

ON REPRESENTATION

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*Louis Marin*

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Catherine Porter

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## § 21 The Frame of Representation and Some of Its Figures

In art theory as in the art of describing, it is probably useful to begin by recalling certain elements of the philosophical context in which the problems of representation in painting has been constructed and the problems of framing have arisen: in a foreword, it seems appropriate, without getting caught in a vicious circle, to set up the philosophical framework for the framing of pictorial representation.

We find in Furetière's late-seventeenth-century *Dictionnaire universel*, under the verb *représenter*, "to represent," a fruitful tension that permeates the meaning of the term. "To represent" signifies first of all to substitute something present for something absent (which is of course the most general structure of signs). This type of substitution is, as we know, governed by a mimetic economy: it is authorized by a postulated similarity between the present thing and the absent thing.<sup>1</sup> But in other respects, to represent means to show, to exhibit something present. In this case, the very act of presenting constructs the identity of what is represented, identifies the thing represented as such.<sup>2</sup> On the one hand, then, a mimetic operation between presence and absence allows the entity that is present to function in the place of the absent one. On the other hand, a spectacular operation, a self-presentation, constitutes an identity and a property by giving the representation legitimate value.<sup>3</sup>

In other words, to represent means to present oneself representing something. Every representation, every representational sign, every signifying process thus includes two dimensions, which I am in the habit of calling, in the first case, reflexive—to present oneself—and, in the second case, transitive—to represent something. These two dimensions come quite

close to what contemporary semantics and pragmatics have conceptualized as the opacity and the transparency of the representational sign.<sup>4</sup>

While exploring the relations between these two dimensions, between reflexivity with a subject effect and transitivity with an object effect, in one of the most remarkable developments of the theory of the representation-sign, the seventeenth-century Port-Royal *Logic*,<sup>5</sup> and in connection with maps and portraits,<sup>6</sup> the two paradigmatic examples of signs for logicians of that era, I encountered frames, the operators and processes of positioning and framing, and their figures, among the mechanisms that every representation includes in order to present itself in its function, its functioning, and, indeed, its functionality as representation. The more the transitive dimension presses its claims powerfully, the more that "mimetic" transparency is manifested seductively, the more the games and pleasures of substitution occupy the attention of the gaze powerfully and captivate its desire,<sup>7</sup> the less the mechanisms are noticed, the less they are acknowledged by descriptive discourse on painting.

These presentation mechanisms seem to be self-evident; as Yves Michaud observed in a text written some time ago,<sup>8</sup> the painting of frame or decor is not seen, not discussed. So I propose to rescue three mechanisms for presenting representation in painting from their oblivion or misrecognition and bring them back into the foreground of theoretical attention and of the descriptive gaze: the background, the plane, and the frame. Properly understood, these three mechanisms constitute the general framework for representation, its boundaries, closure, as we were given to saying a decade ago.

The material underpinnings and the surface used for inscription and figuration—the background, by means of which every figure is made available to the gaze—can be looked at in terms of its relations with the other figures and in terms of its potential for reference.<sup>9</sup> The presence of this background is denied by the illusory depth created by the prospective apparatus that hollows it out, into the far distance,<sup>10</sup> all the way to infinity, an infinity represented in painting by the atmospheric work of the horizon,<sup>11</sup> a limit pushed toward the limitless.<sup>12</sup> This is the case with Claude's *Port Scene with the Embarcation of Cleopatra for Tarsus*, or Rembrandt's *Landscape with a Bridge*. Conversely, if we proceed a little further along the limit by means of which a surface "frames" a representation in its background, we shall find the background being thrust forward by a relative neutralization of depth and a negation of all figures or represented entities in the far distance; the backdrop surfaces as a wall or partition, as a black or gray surface. The back-

ground appears as surface, and it is at this point that a painting presents itself as a painting, presents itself less as representing something than as a representation. Let us take for example the black background in the *Vanitas* attributed to Champaigne; the discourse describing this background can say nothing except that it represents nothing, at the very moment when the gaze discovers that it is this nothing that gives the figures in *Vanitas* their compelling force.<sup>13</sup> Or there is the famous *Ex-voto* done in 1662 by the same Champaigne, in which, without any break in continuity between the corner of the cell, which hollows out the represented space in which the painter's daughter is miraculously healed, and the support of an inscription that makes of the representation an ex-voto, the background loses its feigned depth as an "image" to become the written surface of a prayer.<sup>14</sup>

The plane of representation, the second element in the positioning of a representation, is at work "all over," from edge to edge, from left to right, from top to bottom, encompassing the entire painting; this element is all the easier to forget in that it is entirely transparent. It is the fourth, "frontal" wall of the scenographic cube, the one that Michael Fried evokes in connection with Diderot, who asked us to imagine it closed, on the stage, so that the figures in the narrative would behave as if they were unseen, as if, in the process of representing and in the representation, they were wholly present to their own acts<sup>15</sup>—for example, in paintings by Greuze in which no external gaze crosses that invisible boundary and distracts the figures from their functions. Unless, conversely, this frame plane appears obliquely to the eye owing to the excess that is deposited there by a drop of water on a trompe-l'oeil or a fly in a still life,<sup>16</sup> an excess that is pointed up by the slightly obscene cucumber in Crivelli's *Annunciation*.<sup>17</sup> And we can see how, in comparison, in Champaigne's *Ex-voto*, the written surface plays, undecidably, between the surface-background and the representation-plane.

Finally, there is the frame: edge and rim, frontier and limit.<sup>18</sup> Among the various mechanisms that surround and present representations, I propose to focus primarily on the frame. *Cadre*, *cornice*, frame: the three languages seem to cooperate in exchanging the same words and significations to sketch in the problematics of the frame, of positioning and framing: the frame as *cadre* signifies the border of wood or other material within which one places a painting. To Mme de Sévigné, who writes: "I do not advise you to put a frame around that painting," Rousseau replies, through the intermediary of a dictionary, "On the . . . crudest . . . drawings I put quite brilliant, well-gilded frames."<sup>19</sup> Although the etymological meaning of the



FIGURE 21.1 Carlo Crivelli, *The Annunciation* (detail). National Gallery, London, Great Britain. Reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees, The National Gallery, London. Photograph courtesy of Alinari/Art Resource, New York.

word *cadre* is *carré*, "square," we also speak of round or oval *cadres*. The French term thus emphasizes the notion of edge: the *cadre* ornaments the extreme limit of the geometrically cut-out surface of the canvas.

With *cornice*, on the other hand, Italian has adopted an architectural term: the projection that extends outward around a building to protect its base from rain; a protruding molding that crowns all sorts of works, especially friezes on entablatures in the classical Greek orders; the values of ornamentation and protection, the notions of momentousness [*prégnance*] and projection are played out in this term.<sup>20</sup>

The English term “frame” points instead to a structural element in the construction of a painting, the latter being understood less as representation or image than as canvas. A frame is a stretcher that extends the canvas so it will be suited for receiving pigments. Rather than an edge or a border, rather than an ornament for a painting’s outer limits, it is the substructure of the support mechanism and of the surface of representation.<sup>21</sup>

The artifact of the frame thus displays a remarkable polysemy, between supplement and complement, gratuitous ornament and necessary mechanism. As Poussin wrote to Chantelou when he sent him *The Israelites Gathering the Manna*:

When you receive [your picture], I beg of you, if you like it, to provide it with a small frame [l’ornier d’un peu de corniche]; it needs one so that, in considering it in all its parts, the [rays of the] eye shall remain concentrated, and not dispersed beyond the limits of the picture by receiving impressions [?] of objects which, seen pell-mell with the painted objects, confuse the light.<sup>22</sup>

In a word, the frame is a necessary *parergon*, a constitutive supplement. It autonomizes the work within the visible space;<sup>23</sup> it puts the representation in a state of exclusive presence; it gives the appropriate definition of the conditions for the visual reception and contemplation of the representation as such. If we analyze Poussin’s advice to Chantelou carefully (although we could find identical advice in treatises on painting),<sup>24</sup> we find that the frame transforms the varied play of perceptible diversity, the raw material of the perceptual syntheses of recognition of the things that articulate them by way of differences, into an opposition in which representation is identified as such through the exclusion of all other objects from the field of the gaze.<sup>25</sup> By virtue of its frame, the painting is not simply offered, among other things, to view: it becomes an object of contemplation. In their representation on Claude’s canvas, or Poussin’s, the things that had simply animated the space of the world with their differences—trees and the sky, a palace and clouds, a lake and its boats—become a landscape to be contemplated,<sup>26</sup> an ideal, pastoral, heroic landscape, excluding the species of neighboring objects, as Poussin says, through the power of its margins and its edges, a power acquired by its frame. Here, the world is wholly contained; outside this space, there is nothing to contemplate. The representative construction has become autonomous, has taken on a different aspect, has become a simple perceptual apprehension of things in prospect, a function of reason, as Poussin also says,<sup>27</sup> a modi-



FIGURE 21.2 Charles Le Brun, *Louis XIV Receives Count Fuentes*. Chateaux de Versailles et de Trianon, Versailles, France. Photograph courtesy of Giraudon/Art Resource, New York.

fication, a modalization of the gaze. There, we say, we looked at the world, at nature; here, we are contemplating the work of art alone. I hardly need add that this operation of framing and positioning will itself be invested with powers, modalized by institutions, remarked by agencies of economic, social, and ideological determination.<sup>28</sup> Representation, in its reflexive dimension, presents itself to someone. Representational presentation is caught up in the dialogic structure of sender and receiver, whoever they may be, whom the frame will provide with one of the privileged places for “making known,” “inducing belief,” “making felt,” as a place for the instructions and injunctions that the power of representation, and in representation, addresses to the reader-viewer.<sup>29</sup>

This is how we enter the world of the figures of the frame and of framing. The figures of ostentation first, the ornamental figures on the edges, flowers and fruit, weaving borders with their symmetries and their calculated repetitions.<sup>30</sup> In its pure operation, the frame displays; it is a deictic, an iconic “demonstrative”: “this.” The figures ornamenting the edges “insist” on pointing out, they amplify the gesture of pointing: *deixis* becomes

*epideixis*, monstration becomes de-monstration, the historical narrative represented becomes a discourse of praise<sup>31</sup> even while articulating this discourse more subtly than we might think possible in the space of presentation, in the viewer's space. Thus in the tapestry of the *History of the King*, the drawings for which were done by Le Brun,<sup>32</sup> the frame is not only a powerful ostentatious mechanism allowing the historical scene represented to present itself, but it is also constructed as a mechanism for capturing natural light, the light that shines on the place where the tapestry is exhibited, since the right-hand and lower internal edges of the frame are lighted, whereas the other two sides are in shadow. Thus the "artificial" internal light that illuminates the scene becomes consistent with the "natural" external light: it is the same. By that very token, the space of the viewer is neutralized or, rather, is converted into a space of representation.<sup>33</sup> The tapestry was part of the furnishings at Versailles, after all. Through its figures, the ornamental decor of the frame thus becomes a "metarepresentation," a powerful instrument of appropriation and of propriety on the part of the representation itself, in its subject—what is represented on the stage of the story—and to its subject—the actor-subject in that story: in the case in point, the king.<sup>34</sup>

This is also how the frame (by this I mean the processes and procedures of framing, the dynamics and power of positioning) will delegate some of its functions to a particular figure, who, even as he participates in the action, in the story that is "told," "represented," will utter by his gestures, his posture, his gaze, not so much what is to be seen, what the viewer *must* see, as *the way to see it*: these are the pathetic figures of framing. Here, in fact, Le Brun and Poussin are only exploiting one of Alberti's precepts concerning the representation of the *istoria*, namely, that one of its figures should be placed in the position of a commentator, *admonitor* and *advocator* of the work:

In an *istoria* I like to see someone who admonishes and points out to us what is happening there [in the story, the narrative, the painting]: or beckons with his hand to see; or menaces with an angry face and with blazing eyes, so that no one should come near; or shows some danger or marvellous thing there; or invites us to weep or to laugh together with them.<sup>35</sup>

Continuing to work with this royal and classical corpus, we can observe that the figure or figures of framing are most often figures located around the edges of the scene, the first one on the right or on the left, not a delegate

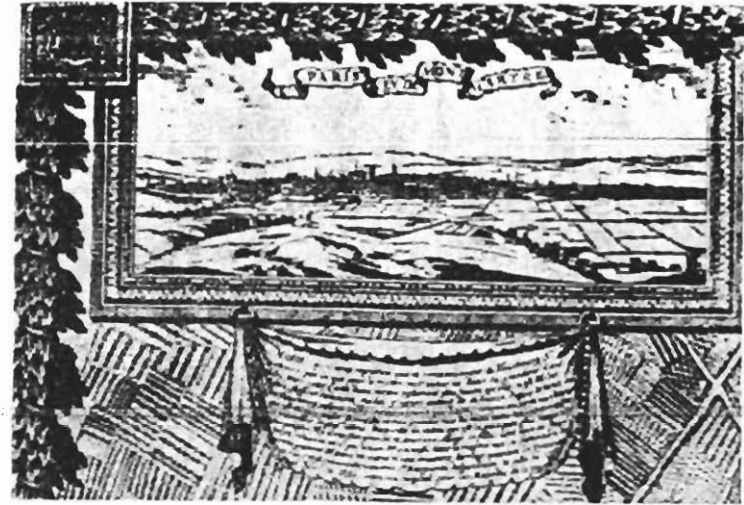


FIGURE 21.3 Jacques Gomboust, Map of Paris, 1652 (upper left corner).

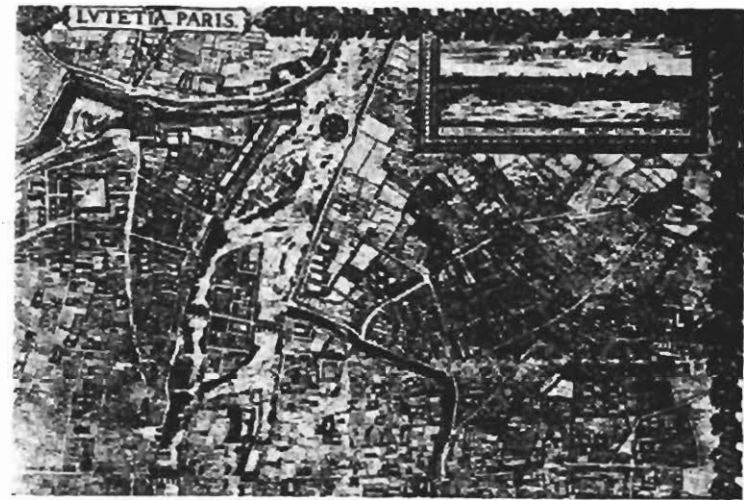


FIGURE 21.4 Jacques Gomboust, Map of Paris, 1652 (upper right corner).



of the viewer (and/or of the painter), but a delegate of the frame intended to signify to the viewer the pathic (pathetic) modality of the gaze that he *must direct onto the istoria*.<sup>36</sup> Thus at the far right-hand edge of the scene, we find a peasant contemplating the royal epiphany of *The King's Entry into Dunkirk*; with a few variations, the head of this figure recaptures an expressive profile of the same Le Brun, that of astonishment in the seventeenth-century sense.<sup>37</sup> There is also, in an example Le Brun had already pointed out in a talk at the Royal Academy, the figure at the far left-hand edge in *Manna*, a figure expressing reverent admiration before the scene of Roman Charity that unfolds before his eyes.<sup>38</sup> We understand, then, that under such circumstances, descriptive discourse at its most precise must turn away from the work in some sense, must turn away from an internal reading, not so much in order to produce an external interpretation as in order to formulate with adequate conceptual constructs the signifying processes of the frontiers and limits through which representation in painting defines the specific modalities of its presentation.<sup>39</sup>

I noted at the outset that the Port-Royal logicians found paradigmatic examples of representational signs in maps and portraits. Thus I would like to turn to maps and portraits first of all as we pursue the operations of positioning and framing, as we continue working on margins and edges. And, to begin with, the model of the geographical map: let us take for example a fragment of a map of Paris made by Jacques Gomboust in 1652.<sup>40</sup> An exemplification of the transitive dimension of the sign, at first glance both accurate and rigorous, this representation makes present once again a thing that is not or is no longer present. By iconic hypotyposis,<sup>41</sup> the map of Paris sets before our eyes a Paris that no one will ever see, not even Gomboust at the very moment he was preparing this first "scientific" map of the capital:<sup>42</sup> Gomboust knows the map of Paris, the "real" configuration of the thing, so well that in the upper left-hand corner of his map he includes a picture with the written caption "Paris seen from Mont Martre" and, in the upper right-hand section, he puts another picture with the legend "Galerie du Louvre." Two images, two paintings constituting part of the border, which propose to the map's user, as a mimetic representation of Paris, a privileged trajectory from the external northern approach to the center where the city is concentrated: the place of its king. Through the pair of border pictures, the city in its map, the map of the city, city and map in a precise and ideally perfect coextension, are presented respectively as the represented and the representer,

the one within the other, as representation; thus they present themselves, but according to a particular trajectory and according to a singular modality in which the political power of the monarch is affirmed,<sup>43</sup> in a representation constructed according to the order of universal geometric reason in the truth of its rigorous ideality and the exactness of its empirical referentiation. If we look still more closely at the map, in the lower left-hand and right-hand sections, we spot a second frame configuration with small human figures on a "fictitious" hill near Charenton who are contemplating Paris, while looking in fact, as we are, at its map, its representation. Above and below, two framing devices, two modalized effects of reflexive opacity: the little figures are the representatives, on this lower edge, as the two "pictures" were on the upper edge, of the map's "self-presentation as a representation of Paris," through which the subject of representation as an effect of the mechanism of representation enters into the map, under the law of power, under the law governing the representation of the prince.<sup>44</sup>

A counterexample to these figures of frame, edge, and margin in geographic maps is offered by two framing images in a book that was a European best-seller in its day, at the dawn of the sixteenth century: two frontispieces, images that mark the reader's entrance into the book, engraved respectively by an anonymous artist and by the Holbein brothers, for the first and second editions of Thomas More's *Utopia* in 1516 and 1518.<sup>45</sup> In their resemblances and their differences, these two frontispieces reveal the subtle modal games of the frame figures of representations, all the more so in that the utopia is represented (in the book and by More's text) as a map, the product of a very learned art of describing that makes what it utters "exist" and that makes what it writes "visible":<sup>46</sup> thus the utopia in question is a map, a cartographic representation that constitutes what it represents as a fictional referent, a map that is not on the maps or that is there without being discoverable.<sup>47</sup>

In 1516, the caravel is moored before the entrance to the inner bay. The ship has reached its destination; its sails are furled, and on the bridge a small silhouette is looking at the island and/or at a map: the figure is contemplating the topographic view of the island's capital in the landscape and reads its name, *Civitas Amaurotum*, engraved on the map. In 1518, the boat is an exact reproduction of the earlier one, but inverted, a mirror image: no longer moored, it is making its way toward the coast where three men are standing on a cliff above the sea. By this re-version of the image, this re-



FIGURE 21.5 Frontispiece to More's *Utopia* (1516).

lection, it turns back toward us, toward our world, and the small person on the bridge, his back to the island, is looking at his approaching homeland. None of the men on the cliff is looking at the island, but one of them, perched on a cartouche in which its name is inscribed, points out the island and/or its map to his companion, Thomas More: he is *recounting* his voyage to More, *showing* him the marvelous island, *making* him *see* it—but by his description in language. The third figure, a soldier, seen in profile, his sword at his side, is listening to the conversation.<sup>48</sup>

Let me repeat that none of these figures is *looking* at the island and/or its map in the space of the world, in the space of the image. The island and/or its map has become an object of language, of listening and writing, a *text*, and we—who are about to read Thomas More's *Utopia*, who see its image and muse about what the image represents—see it only through

the mediation of the two figures, Raphael and More, only through the dialogue, the narrative and the description that these figures represent, as the *ekphrasis* that the narrative of the one and the writing of the other have constructed: fiction.<sup>49</sup>

The Holbein brothers engraved the interplay of travel and maps, of reality and its fiction, knowingly and ironically: in 1516, the anonymous artist had written three "toponyms," *Civitas Amaurotum*, *Fons Anydri*, *Ostium Anydri*, on or in the map of the island. In 1518, the Holbein brothers inscribed them in three cartouches that are suspended by garlands *attached to the frame of the representation*. These toponyms, which, in geographic maps, are written on the represented places that they name while making what is represented coincide with what is named<sup>50</sup>—these names in the Holbein engraving, through the decorative apparatus that bears them, take visual precedence over the represented objects they name; they come before the entire image; they belong to its frame, to its edge. They are positioned, as it were, on the transparent plane of the screen of representation. They show obliquely that unrepresentable part of the iconic sign, the part that, if it were represented, would, owing to its opacity, neutralize and cancel out what the representation represents.<sup>51</sup> They show that Utopia (the island, the map) is only a representation, a discursive *ekphrasis*, a fiction of things by means of words. But they also show, conversely, that by its edges and its limits, by the work of its frame and its powers of framing, every representation conceals a utopia, the fiction of a desire, a fiction that is realized in this very place, moreover, and of which Christo's drawings for *Surrounded Islands*, in 1983, could be said to be the "representation," echoing the Holbein brothers' engraving of 1518.<sup>52</sup>

The model of the portrait is the other paradigm of the representation sign. It directly exemplifies the sign's reflexive dimension. At the very moment when it is making an absent or dead being present, every sign copies, reflects, or emphasizes the operation of representation. The presentation of that operation, as the act of a subject of representation and as if it were identifying that subject in return as *its own* representation, is particularly obvious in the case of portraits. The "I" is represented as presenting itself in the sign that represents it.<sup>53</sup> The portrait is the very figure of the presentation of representation, a fortiori when the portrait is a self-portrait. From this standpoint, and it would not be one of the lesser para-

doxes of self-portraits in general, might we not consider it, as such, as a frame figure? This seems to be Poussin's explicit intention in his 1650 *Self-portrait* in the Louvre.<sup>54</sup>

It is not Poussin the individual, the unique person, the "I" who is a native of Normandy living in 1650 in Rome, that the painter represents. It is first and foremost the painter-subject, and even more the subject of the work of painting, of painting in labor and at work with its own instruments and means. Two attributes initially displace this work onto the represented image of the painter: the portfolio that contains the invisible preparatory sketches, the *disegno*, the soul of the painting, and the diamond set in a ring on the master's hand, serving as an emblem of the genesis of the whole range of colors through the sunlight refracted in the prism of its transparency.<sup>55</sup> But the figure of the painter refers these two attributes to the field of painting itself, to the space of the painting represented reflexively as that of the process by which the work, in its various stages, is fabricated: here is a moving confrontation between the painter and the limits and frames of representation in painting. Between two stretchers turned backward and a canvas that has been prepared but not painted, the background of the painting in fact represents a fragment of a picture frame and a finished picture slipping toward the left, but of which only a fragment of what it represents can be seen. In the remotest part of the background, the painting represents paintings that show what is not usually shown, their backsides. In the nearest part of the background, and serving as backdrop for the painter figure, a canvas shows what is not seen in a painting, the underside, what is under the painted space of the representation. What is unshowable and invisible in the painted picture is not only shown, here, but also represented as what is neither showable nor visible. The painter paints the surface of his painting in the canvases he represents—what is actually underneath and behind the picture he is painting, but to which his own figure has turned its back.

We need to go still further in this reflexive exploration of frames and limits undertaken by the painter himself. The canvas that shows its backside prevents the painting on the left from showing everything it represents: the frame of the simulated painting hides part of it, and that of the painting we are looking at, the painter's self-portrait, conceals another part. Between the two, on the inner frame of the work, a woman's figure is painted, a frame figure that seems to appear only to escape the canvas: an allegory of painting, Bellori tells us;<sup>56</sup> a figure of the theory of the art of

painting, as Donald Posner has shown.<sup>57</sup> Art theory, the theory of painting, is represented as the partially visible "term" for the practice of painting.

Now, in this twice-hidden picture, we notice two hands belonging to a figure outside the frame. These hands surround the allegory of art theory; they represent the practice of painting, and they belong to a figure outside the painting: the hands of the subject of the art of painting, the hands of the practice of painting, of the painter whose hands we, as viewers, shall never see, except in representation. At all events, we shall never see the allegory of the practice of painting joined with the theory of painting, since the self-portrait addressed to Chantelou, the picture we are looking at, realizes this junction by putting into practice, in the work, the indissoluble unity of the theory and practice of painting. That unity could not be presented except by the lack of the figured representation of one of its terms, so that the frame, in its positioning effects, inverts its function of presentation of representation in painting, or rather it puts this function to work in its interval of edges: by presenting the representation of the painter, the frame conceals the figured representation of what the representation itself accomplishes, the work that we see. But this deficiency in the framing indicates that the work of painting is what is making itself visible between edges; and representation is conceptualized in what is perceived between a canvas and a presentation.

In counterpoint to Poussin's *Self-portrait* and the work of frames on the subject of painting, it seems to me that Leonardo Cremonini's well-known canvas *Guet-apens* (1972–73) could be viewed as its modern pictorial and theoretical commentary:<sup>58</sup> here, as in Poussin's picture, the frames represented overlap and pile up and interrupt one another, whatever the "represented" object they frame may be—doors, mirrors, windows, or nothing, like the empty frame on the right. All these frames, like the frames, canvases, and stretchers in Poussin's painting, articulate a very narrow, "infrathin" space, which is almost reduced to the superimposition of planes. The frame that presents the picture we are looking at interrupts the frames that this same picture represents for us, as if the rigorous law governing the positioning of frames called precisely for making things visible by partially obscuring them from view. As for the children, dwarves, or monsters who appear among these piled-up frames, they seem to obey the same law: a head without a body on the right, a head, a body without arms or legs in the center. And, in the foreground, there is the blind child with outstretched arms, hands and arms cut off by the frames. At the same time,

on the right, an arm without a body is pushing an empty frame toward the center.

Poussin set up a monumental figure of the subject of representation against the background, the self-portrait of painting, frame, stretcher, and background; here, that figure is dismembered into four childlike (or monstrous) figures that seem to be playing blindman's buff: a game of seeing, or of being seen without seeing, played among empty frames. Or else they are frozen figures, or figures captured in motion and immobilized, as in a dream where all these frames would be trying to seize them, frame them, put them into representation: "The space of my paintings is for me a space of contradiction and conflict."<sup>59</sup> *Guet-apens*, "ambush," is its title, the name of a game of blinding in a maze of rectangular barriers, a *mise en abyme* of representation and its staging, in presence, by the play of its frames. Cremonini described his picture as "a very tense relation between the frame of a mirror and the stretcher of a painting," which is also the violent relation that tears the painter apart: he is torn between the desire to enclose the visible within the frame of his picture and his fascination with what eludes that space, the reality of the visible.<sup>60</sup> We shall find this same play with frames among the Dutch painters, in Vermeer—as Svetlana Alpers has noted<sup>61</sup>—or in Velasquez—where, with Foucault, we can see the birth of the age of representation.<sup>62</sup>

A small painting by Klee—which I came across by chance, the way one can make a joke by accident—had the good fortune to have its painter give it its name, its Latin title, which is the very title (or part of the title) that I gave to an earlier study: the work is called *Ad marginem*,<sup>63</sup> on the margin, toward the margin, toward the frame of representation in painting. I have said that the painter names it, but also that the painting names itself. To paraphrase briefly some remarks Klee made in a lecture in Jena,<sup>64</sup> the painter names it and writes its name in the margin, "Ad marginem," and the painting names itself *Ad marginem*, "in the margin."

This small painting (46 cm. x 35 cm.) in the Basel museum will allow us, if not to answer the questions I have asked, at least to circumscribe some of their edges, some margins. Will Grohmann describes the painting this way: "*Ad Marginem* . . . looks like an old document with the dominant red planet in the center on a field of weathered green. The ghostly writing is scattered along the margins as in a child's drawing; included are plantlike hieroglyphics, a bird, fragments of figures, and letters of the alphabet—a diploma from the realm of Nature."<sup>65</sup>

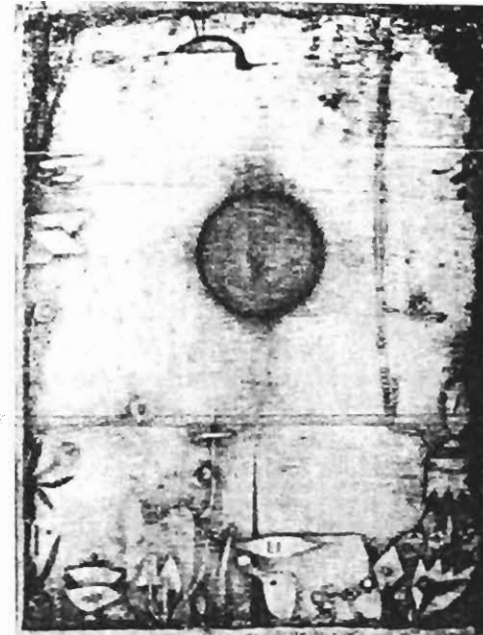


FIGURE 21.6 Paul Klee, *Ad Marginem*. Oeffentliche Kunstsammlung Basel, Kunstmuseum, Basel, Switzerland. Photograph courtesy of Scala/Art Resource, New York.

The writing's formal elements—scattered, it is true, along the *edges* of the painting, on its margins, but precisely supported by them—are those of a refined, precious vegetation, graminaceae and umbelliferae, more abundant on one side than on the other three: a rare profusion of objects, embracing a dispersal of the gaze that corresponds to the dispersal of these botanical figures of the frame. But the gaze is continually recentered by the intense central red disk endowed with dark rays that trace a sort of cruciform nocturnal aura on the green background. The gaze hesitates on the other edge of the painting that is its background: does that "aura" belong to the red planet—"figure"—or to the "surface-background" of the *tavola*? The gaze hesitates, too, in seeking the source of the dark rays: do they come from the red sun, through an intensification of its boundaries, or from a star that the sun is hiding in a sort of inverted eclipse?

But has there ever been, in nature, a bird capable of walking along an edge, upside down, even if only as a silhouette, a bird reduced to its simplest expression, a bird "sign," a hieroglyphic, as Grohmann says? Were hieroglyphics or pictograms ever actually written like this, upside down? Yes, probably, if the gaze seeks to read correctly, appropriately, the four alphabetic letters written on its edges correctly: "v" near the upper edge, "r" on the left side, "l" on the right, "u" in the lower margin. Three consonants, one vowel: the central "u" in the lower margin responds with its vowel voice to the "v" in the upper margin, "v" so close graphically to "u" but condemned, as a consonant, to being sounded with its vowel "u"- "vu." The same is true for the "r" and the "l": "r-u," "u-l."

In the margin of the painting, among the aquatic plants, there is thus a voice underneath the graphic signs that represent it, amid the hieroglyphics and pictograms that belong to a language that is Klee's own—the voice of a vowel, or rather a vowel from a voice absent from the painting: the "u" that allows the other three letters to be pronounced. Here, then, the gaze somewhat frantically traverses the painting's margin in all directions, in search of a direction, a meaning, turning in a circle (or rather in a rectangle) around the central red circle.

Still, thanks to this trajectory, the bird walks properly on its feet, not upside down, in its margin; but then—surprise!—the "u" becomes an "n," while its three consonant companions become the signs of an indecipherable script. Here we find ourselves relegated—the better to see—to the most extreme margin of the voice.<sup>66</sup>

If it is to meet with success, this quest for direction and meaning, in the margin of the voice and on the internal frame of the representation, between vocalic sign and consonantal signs that represent it to hearing and to sight, presupposes a displacement of the eye in the external frame of the painting, or else a rotation of the painting itself around its red center. This process of anamorphosis interrogates the modern subject by means of its frame and its representation, by means of its margins and its edge figures. In fact, if, to shift my position around Klee's painting, I put it on the ground, as Pollock, twenty years later, will do for his huge drippings, then the margins of the painting *Ad marginem* become a four-cornered well in which, in the greenish water at the bottom, a red planet is reflected and caught—unless it emerges from its depths quite precisely at the place of my eye, which is looking at itself and discovering itself in the form of a darkly radiant star: a paralyzing displacement in the reflexivity of the

mechanism, a stupefying shift in the presentation of representation by the very instrument of its closure, the margin.

To conclude this itinerary on the margins of representation and their figures, and to assess its stakes still more directly, perhaps, I should like to call to mind a moment in a painting by Frank Stella, *Gran Cairo*.<sup>67</sup> It belongs to a series of paintings of the same type and organization, in which it seems to me that Stella explores the various dimensions of the problematics of the frame of representation in painting with a kind of systematic attention: I have a feeling that this exploration has some relevance to my own remarks, from Poussin to Klee, from Holbein to Cremonini.<sup>68</sup>

At first glance, Stella's canvas is made up of frames. The plane of representation is invaded by them from its outermost edge to its center, in a triumph of the frame and of positioning—of presentation—over representation. The canvas is the field of an all-powerful force: that of its external limit, entirely directed toward its center. The traces that this force has left inscribed on the canvas are the frames. Unless we consider that the subject of the painting, what it seeks to represent, is precisely the process of framing. In that case, the movement is reversed: from the center toward the periphery, from the inside toward the outside, in particular with the four very powerful centrifugal arrows drawn in the plane by the diagonal lines.<sup>69</sup> Instead of being traces of the force of alterity, the frames are thus traces of an expanding internal force, a force of form regularly repeating the same forms and colors, starting from an initial matrix and with no other logic than to tend arbitrarily toward an end, toward a final encompassing form.

If the frame is one of the means through which representation presents itself representing something, this painting by Stella represents its own presentation. The painting is entirely reflexive and its transitive dimension consists in representing its reflexive dimension. As in Poussin's *Self-portrait*, Cremonini's *Guet-apens*, or Klee's *Ad marginem*, we are witnessing an iconic *mise en abyme* of the opacity of the representational sign in its transparency, or else the inverse, an iconic *regressus ad infinitum*, through the frames of presentation to its representation and from the representation to its presentation. Starting with the outermost violet frame, the describing gaze notes that it frames a blue frame, from which it is separated by a fine linear white frame: then there is a new blue frame centering a yellow frame with an optical interference between the two colors that destabilizes the blue. From the standpoint of color, it seems indeed as though these first three frames

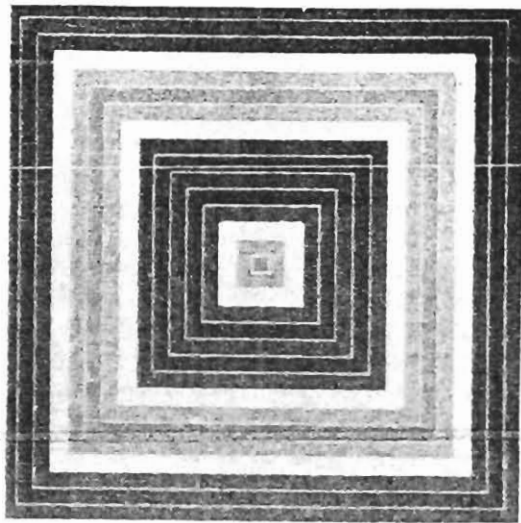


FIGURE 21.7 Frank Stella, *Gran Cairo*. Collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Photograph courtesy of the Whitney Museum of American Art/Geoffrey Clements. © 1995, Whitney Museum of American Art.

constitute a frame whose dominant note is a cool blue, and within this frame, there is another with warm colors, yellow, red, saturated red, red then yellow. This warmly colored frame frames yet another frame, dense and powerful: five square frames separated by four white framing lines—dark green, blue, violet; blue, dark green, in a symmetrical arrangement of cool colors exalting the central violet frame. Now we have reached the picture's center: a yellow frame framing a red frame and this last framing a dazzling small red square with the same fine white line we have seen before.<sup>70</sup>

This small central red square—let us recall that *cadre*, “frame” in French, signifies square—raises both an optical-visual and a theoretical-intellectual question: framed by all the positioning and positioned frames, it positions nothing itself, unless we suggest the paradox of a frame positioning itself, a paradox that is none other than the paradox of infinite reflexivity; a paradox that is, it seems to me, the one that this painting presents *visually*, like the others in the series. Is the small central square the *figure*, the unique

and extreme *figure* of a *quadro* that would be framed by fifteen colored frames? Or is it the last, the ultimate *frame* that would no longer position anything but itself, or that would frame a zero figure (infinitely), an invisible figure? We have noted that each large frame square is framed by a frame constituted by a fine white line. Is that line another sort of frame regularly distributed on the canvas? Yes and no. We can indeed view these lines as *limit* frames, frames tending to the limit, to their limit, without ever being able to reach it; but we can also view the white lines as remainders and traces of the supporting canvas, subsisting under the layers of color. Still, these lines become vestiges of the support surface only when this support is itself marked with square frames of color. The lines become traces of origin only after the colored squares have been traced: in the lines we discover, visually, a way of grasping time through spacing, or, conversely, a way of structuring space through temporal antecedence.<sup>71</sup>

And that is what appears, in my opinion, if, instead of applying our description to the flat surface of the colored canvas, as if, owing to the square frames, there were a remainderless coincidence between what is represented and the plane of representation, we notice that our gaze, visually, optically, descends in depth to the interior of the flat surface of the painting, as if by way of a colored staircase that hollows out the surface of the plane starting at its outermost limit. Our gaze descends this staircase to rejoin the central square, the vanishing “point” square that itself represents the “point” of the subject, that is, the place of infinite reflexivity.

But now, suddenly, everything changes. A visual event, an optical catastrophe: the staircase leading toward the depths becomes a colored pyramid, whose summit, the little red square, extends toward the viewing point, to the place of my eye, a pyramid entirely exceeding the plane of representation with all its positioning and positioned frames, entering into the viewer's space, into the space of presentation of the work.<sup>72</sup>

This event of optical reversal or visual conversion is, as we know from the laws of the psychology of form and the physiology of the eye, at once random in its appearance and completely determined by our optical and perceptual apparatus. Such is the time of the frame or of the positioning, of which Stella's frames would be the figure, a rhythmic time (which is basically that of the ornamental borders of classical representations, a time with a spatial beat), but without definite measure, a flow-time: the more it is determined by the processes of framing of the representation-sign, the more it appears accidental to the subject of the representation; it is a time in

which that subject is at once a completely determined product of the mechanism of representation and the chance producer of that mechanism.<sup>73</sup>

Are these frame squares of Stella's a well or a pyramid?<sup>74</sup> A well *and* a pyramid, but never at the same time. The eye cannot predict the necessary and arbitrary moment of conversion in which all the serious play of the frame and its modern and contemporary figures seem to be concentrated: the play of the rhythm of presentation and representation, the play of the subject of the art of seeing and the art of describing.

## § 22 Ruptures, Interruptions, Syncopes in Representation in Painting

I would like the three terms that give this study its title to be understood as variations on the ellipses, silences, and blanks that give our meeting its themes. The term "rupture" emphasizes the "breaking-through," the *enfonçure*, as people said in the seventeenth century, the break, cut, or caesura that tears apart some continuity in space or time, some logical and semantic coherence, or even semantic cohesion, at a specific level or in a specific realm. Rupture can even be the violent mark of a limit, a tracing to the quick, as it were, of an edge that cuts off an exposed form or an exhibited figure. Rupture can sometimes also be the visual equivalent of a silence, as in the famous painting by Edvard Munch, *The Scream*, the high-pitched silence of a sound beyond the reach of hearing, or even in Poussin's *The Massacre of the Innocents* in the Chantilly museum. The anamorphosis of the skull in Holbein's *Ambassadors* can be taken as the "classic" example of rupture in terms of the painting's semantic coherence and syntactic cohesion, but also in the mechanism that governs its impact on the gaze.

The term "interruption," for its part, emphasizes the opening up of a gap, an interval, within some continuity or continuation: distance, spacing, the *différance* of delay or postponement; it also points up the effects of such a gap for the viewer or hearer. In the treatise by Pseudo-Longinus, interruption is a characteristic figure of the sublime, and in the early nineteenth century, Fontanier noted in his own treatise that "interruption leaves suspended all at once, through the effect of an overly acute emotion, a sentence that has already been begun, in order to begin another entirely different one, or to go on with the first one only after having sprinkled it with expressions that are grammatically foreign to it."<sup>1</sup> Fontanier