

Perception of Occlusion in Early Renaissance and Australian Aboriginal Art

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Perceptual processes dealing with the occlusion of a farther surface by a nearer one, which is ubiquitous in viewing the real world, have been investigated by Gestalt psychologists and others. The phenomena of figure-ground, subjective contours and amodal completion are three aspects of such perceptual processing that have received a lot of attention in recent years. In painting, creating an impression of occlusion can cause greater problems than in real viewing because there is no stereoscopic vision to segregate objects in depth from one another. Under these circumstances surfaces may seem joined together rather than overlapping one another. The gestalt processes mentioned above are especially relevant in that case. Yet although artists' use of linear perspective has received a great deal of attention from psychologists interested in art, their skill in depicting occlusion has received almost none.

In this talk I'll deal with two aspects of occlusion in paintings. The first part will focus on the early Renaissance when artists tried to paint realistic scenes for the first time. It is fascinating to see how they dealt with the problem of occlusion. The choices they made, for example with respect to halos, reveal aesthetic and religious priorities as well as perceptual judgments. In the second part I'll discuss the sophisticated depiction of occlusion by aboriginal artists painting non-realistic scenes. They are using fundamental responses of the human visual system that have evolved (or been learnt) to deal with real occlusions but which do not depend on meaning for their effect. These effects are used very skillfully to give aesthetic impact and symbolic meaning in aboriginal works of art.