# RUBIN’S FIGURE

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October 22, 2025

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RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2025). *RUBIN’S FIGURE*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES. Retrieved from https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=54497

# RUBIN'S FIGURE

**Primary Disciplinary Field(s):** Perceptual Psychology, Gestalt Psychology, Cognitive Science

## 1. Core Definition

The **Rubin's Figure**, often referred to as the **Rubin Vase** or **Goblet Figure**, stands as one of the most iconic examples of an ambiguous or bistable image in the field of perceptual psychology. It is a two-dimensional drawing that allows for two distinctly different and mutually exclusive interpretations depending on which area of the image the viewer's brain assigns the status of "figure" and which area is relegated to the "ground." The central ambiguity involves a symmetrical shape that can be perceived either as a single white vase or goblet occupying the central space, or as two dark faces in profile looking toward each other, using the central contour line as the boundary for both interpretations. This phenomenon fundamentally illustrates the brain's active role in constructing reality from sensory input, demonstrating that the perception of a visual scene is not merely a passive registration of light but an interpretive process involving selective attention and organization. The figure serves as a powerful demonstration that even with constant retinal stimulation, the resulting subjective experience can fluctuate dramatically, highlighting the complex, hierarchical nature of visual processing.

The essential mechanism underlying Rubin's Figure is **figure-ground reversal**, a critical component of perceptual organization first systematized by Gestalt psychologists. When the viewer attends to the white central area, it is perceived as the dominant object (the figure, i.e., the vase), appearing closer, more defined, and occupying space, while the surrounding dark area retreats into the background (the ground). Conversely, when attention shifts to the dark areas flanking the center, these profiles become the figure, appearing solid and foregrounded, causing the central white area to transform into undifferentiated background space. Crucially, the observer cannot hold both perceptions simultaneously; the visual system is forced to choose one interpretation at a time, resulting in an oscillatory or alternating perceptual experience. This bistability distinguishes Rubin's figure from simple illusions where the perception is static but distorted, emphasizing the temporal dynamics of cognitive organization.

This conceptual tool is integral to understanding the mechanics of visual constancy and selective attention. The boundary, or the shared contour line between the vase and the faces, is perhaps the most critical element. In typical vision, boundaries belong uniquely to the object they delineate; however, in Rubin's Figure, the single boundary must simultaneously define two competing shapes. The visual system resolves this conflict by assigning ownership of the contour line only to the object currently perceived as the figure. The perceived depth is also manipulated: the figure tends to appear closer and spatially dominant, while the ground appears to recede behind the figure and lack defined shape or texture. This ability of the brain to flip perceived depth and object

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status based purely on interpretive organization, without any change in the physical stimulus, makes the Rubin Vase a foundational example in experimental psychology.

## 2. Etymology and Historical Development

The figure was formally introduced by the Danish philosopher and experimental psychologist **Edgar Rubin** (1886-1951). Rubin first described this specific phenomenon in his two-volume doctoral thesis, *Synsoplevede Figurer* (Visually Experienced Figures), published in Danish in 1915 and later translated into German in 1921 as *Figuren og Grund*. Although similar ambiguous figures existed in historical contexts, Rubin was the first to rigorously study and systematically define the principles governing the relationship between figure and ground. His work moved beyond mere description of optical anomalies and established a comprehensive framework for understanding how the visual field is segmented into distinct forms and undifferentiated background, thereby laying essential groundwork for future research in perceptual organization.

Rubin's research was highly influential in the development of the Gestalt school of psychology, which formalized many of the organizing principles of perception. While Rubin himself was not strictly a Gestalt psychologist, his meticulous experimental findings regarding figure-ground segregation became a cornerstone of Gestalt theory, particularly concerning the Law of Pragnanz (the tendency to perceive the simplest and most stable interpretation) and the Law of Closure. His contemporaries, including Max Wertheimer, Wolfgang Köhler, and Kurt Koffka, adopted and expanded upon Rubin's observations to build their comprehensive models of perceptual grouping. The figure provided undeniable evidence that the "whole is different from the sum of its parts," illustrating that the organizational structure imposed by the mind is fundamental to the resulting visual experience.

Prior to Rubin's formal study, the concepts of ambiguous imagery were mainly treated as artistic curiosities. However, Rubin elevated the study of figure-ground to a scientific domain, recognizing its importance not just as an illusion, but as the basic requirement for object recognition. Without the ability to differentiate an object (figure) from its surroundings (ground), meaningful interaction with the environment is impossible. His detailed analysis established several critical rules for this segregation process, including the tendency for the figure to appear more solid, located in front of the ground, and having a more defined contour. His methodology, combining introspection with controlled visual stimuli, set a high standard for subsequent experimental investigations into visual perception throughout the 20th century.

## 3. Key Characteristics and Principles

The figure exemplifies several fundamental perceptual principles. The primary characteristic is **Bistability**, meaning the visual system spontaneously alternates between two stable perceptual

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states (Vase vs. Faces). This alternation is involuntary and cannot be consciously stopped, though the rate of switching can often be influenced by concentration or effort. This fluctuating perception suggests the existence of neural competition or adaptation mechanisms within the visual cortex; as one interpretation dominates, the associated neural pathway tires or adapts, allowing the competing interpretation to take over temporarily, resulting in the flip. This constant competition is central to how the brain maintains awareness in dynamic environments.

A second key characteristic is the concept of **Contour Ownership**. In the Rubin Vase, the physical boundary is shared between the two potential figures, but perceptually, the boundary is owned exclusively by the figure currently perceived in the foreground. When the vase is seen, the contour is interpreted as the outer edge of the vase; when the faces are seen, the very same contour is interpreted as the profile lines of the faces. The ground, regardless of which area it is, appears to extend indefinitely behind the figure, lacking a defined, owned edge. This asymmetrical relationship between figure and ground demonstrates the brain's mechanism for spatial organization, where boundaries serve to delineate objects rather than mere areas of color.

Furthermore, the figure illustrates the principles of **Closure and Symmetry**. The two faces are perceived as figures partly because they form a symmetrical arrangement, a powerful cue for grouping according to Gestalt principles. The vase, too, is highly symmetrical, making it a "good figure" in Gestalt terms. The ease with which the figure can be organized into meaningful shapes (faces or a vase) rather than merely a collection of black and white patches underscores the brain's tendency to impose organizational rules based on structural regularity and simplicity. This preference for simplicity and meaningful structure is what makes the illusion so compelling and difficult to resolve into both figures simultaneously.

## 4. Significance and Impact

Rubin's Figure holds immense significance as a diagnostic and pedagogical tool in psychology and neuroscience. Pedagogically, it is the quintessential example used in introductory psychology courses to explain the constructive nature of perception--that seeing is not passive photography but active interpretation. It provides an immediate, visceral experience of how the brain selects, organizes, and interprets ambiguous sensory information, making abstract concepts like figure-ground segregation tangible. Its simple yet powerful design allows students and researchers alike to grasp fundamental truths about visual processing.

Scientifically, the figure has driven significant research into the neurological basis of perceptual organization and bistability. Studies utilizing functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) and electroencephalography (EEG) have used the Rubin Vase to map the cortical areas responsible for figure-ground segregation and perceptual switching. These studies consistently demonstrate increased activity in areas of the ventral visual stream (responsible for object recognition) and the

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parietal and frontal cortices (associated with attention and executive control) precisely at the moments the subjective perception flips, even though the visual input remains unchanged. This research confirms that the phenomenon is driven by higher-level cognitive and attentional mechanisms, rather than solely by early visual processing in the retina or V1 cortex.

Beyond academic research, the principles demonstrated by Rubin's Figure have found applications in design, art, and cognitive modeling. Designers often utilize figure-ground ambiguity, whether consciously or unconsciously, in logos (such as the FedEx arrow) and graphic design to create visual interest and complexity. In cognitive science, the figure provides a robust test case for computational models of vision, challenging algorithms to account for top-down influences and spontaneous perceptual shifts. Understanding how the visual system resolves the conflict inherent in the Rubin Vase is a necessary step toward building artificial intelligence systems capable of robust and flexible object recognition in complex, real-world environments.

## 5. Debates and Related Concepts

One enduring debate surrounding the Rubin Vase concerns the locus of the figure-ground distinction. While it is clear that higher cortical areas are involved in the switching process, researchers continue to explore how early visual areas contribute to the initial assignment of figure status. Some theories suggest that early retinal biases, perhaps related to convexity or luminance contrast, predispose the viewer to see one interpretation first. However, the influence of top-down cognitive factors--such as familiarity (priming the viewer to look for faces or objects) or motivational state--is widely acknowledged as crucial in influencing which interpretation dominates and for how long. The interplay between these bottom-up (sensory) and top-down (cognitive) influences remains a rich area of ongoing investigation.

The Rubin Vase is often analyzed alongside other classic ambiguous figures, such as the **Necker Cube** and the Old Woman/Young Woman illusion (or 'My Wife and My Mother-in-Law'). While all these figures demonstrate bistability, they operate on slightly different perceptual principles. The Necker Cube demonstrates ambiguity in perceived depth and orientation within a single object, whereas the Rubin Vase demonstrates ambiguity in object segregation and contour ownership. The Old Woman/Young Woman illusion relies on semantic ambiguity--two distinct meaningful objects existing within the same contours. Comparing these distinct types of ambiguity helps researchers isolate the specific cognitive and neural processes governing shape recognition versus depth perception versus semantic interpretation.

A related conceptual area is the study of camouflage and visual search. Rubin's principles highlight the difficulty the visual system faces when object boundaries are deliberately blurred or manipulated to prevent successful figure-ground segregation. In military or biological contexts, camouflage succeeds by forcing the potential figure (the hidden object) to become perceptually

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integrated into the ground. Conversely, understanding the strong pull toward organization demonstrated by the Rubin Vase informs strategies for maximizing object detectability, emphasizing the clear definition of contours and the use of asymmetry to minimize the chance of figure-ground reversal occurring unintentionally in critical visual displays.

## Further Reading

Rubin vases (Wikipedia)
Edgar Rubin (Wikipedia)
Figure-ground organization (Wikipedia)
Gestalt Psychology (Wikipedia)

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