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Borders Cuts Images

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edited by

Linda Bertelli and Maria Luisa Catoni



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Engramma
Castello 6634 | 30122 Venezia
edizioni@engramma.it

redazione

Centro studi classicA luav
San Polo 2468 | 30125 Venezia
+39 041 257 14 61

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Cut as a device

An example from Classical Antiquity

Maria Luisa Catoni*

I

Of the numerous and diverse figurative contexts, including Classical Antiquity, in which the notion of cut can be observed at work, I will concentrate on a small number of figurative cases that allow me to reflect on one specific issue, i.e. the explicit interaction between represented subject and borders, in which these latter, either fictional or material, are treated as ideally falling outside of the narrative field and belonging to the decorated object rather than the subject being depicted. Although the question of the relationship between narrative, images and movement is closely related to the notion of cut and speaks to the relationship between borders and represented subject, the question of movement necessarily remains outside the scope of this article. The notion, nature and comprehension of movement has attracted a great deal of theoretical and figurative attention since Antiquity, and important modern scholarly publications have been devoted to investigating the rules and devices used to represent movement in various western figurative contexts (Arnheim 1954; Gombrich 1960; Gombrich 1964; Arnheim 1966; Gombrich 1969; Gombrich 1980; Arnheim 1982; Landsberg 1982 with Le Poidevin 1997 and Nyiri 2009; Deleuze 1983; Deleuze 1985; Boehm 1987; Naerebout 1997, with relevant literature on ancient dance; Gombrich 1999; Doane 2002; Bol 2003; Wannagat 2003; Wagner 2008; Catoni 2008 on ancient dance; Mullarkey 2009; Bredekamp 2010; Lauschke, Bredekamp, Arteaga 2012; Leyssen, Rathgeber 2013; Catoni 2013; Giuliani, Catoni 2016). Space limitations prevent me from even touching on a related key notion in Classical Antiquity, that of rhythm, even though this notion is of paramount importance for understanding the relationship between static schemata and the implicit or explicit movement they may express (Petersen 1917; Panofsky 1926; Benveniste [1951] 1966; Sandoz 1971; Pollitt 1974; Naerebout 1997; Mesturini 2001; Pucci 2003; Pucci

2004-2005; Tosaki 2007; Catoni 2008; Giuliani, Catoni 2016; Michon 2018). In this article, a small selection of figurative examples serves the specific aim of analyzing the technical tools used by ancient vase painters to produce artificial cuts and borders as well as to artfully violate, manipulate and play with them.



1 | Petrus Christus, *Portrait of a Carthusian*. Oil on canvas. Signed and dated 1446. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 49.7.19.

II

The Portrait of a Carthusian painted by the Flemish painter Petrus Christus in 1446 [Fig. 1] is a very famous example of “playing with borders” and may serve as an iconic introduction to the reflection proposed here (Petrus Christus, *Portrait of a Carthusian*. Oil on canvas. Signed and dated 1446. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 49.7.19; Panofsky 1953, I, 308 ff.; Upton 1990, in particular 22ff., 65 ff.; Ainsworth 1994, 30, 49-53, 93-95).

The painter famously uses precise illusionistic cuts (Panofsky 1953, 310) and two different light sources positioned opposite each other – one inside and one outside of the painted frame (Upton 1990, 25-26) – to construct different levels of unreality (Sandström 1963), thus engaging the viewer in a continuous movement between them. Proportions, sitter placement, light, borders and cuts are the technical tools used by the painter to draw the viewer into this game. The trompe l’oeil marbled frame with its illusionistic painting of a carved signature of the painter and the date 1446 on the red sill (see Ainsworth 1994, 94-95 regarding the signature, the subsequently-added date and the results of X-radiography and infrared reflectography showing that the painted frame was added after the painting of the portrait), separates the viewer from the sitter; at the same time, however, it functions as a bridge and threshold between the two, a threshold that the light coming from the right hand side actually trespasses (Upton 1990, 25-26). Real frames normally belong to the real world, the one of the beholder; they frame the

object in its materiality (while also contributing to defining its status) and perform the unambiguous function of delimiting the space of the narrative being represented (on the painted frames in ancient mural painting see Salvo 2018; regarding marbleized frames and backs, see Ainsworth 1994, 94; see also Panofsky 1953, 180 ff.; Cämmerer-George 1967; Gludovatz 2005; Platt, Squire 2017).

In a number of daringly illusionistic frames painted by Jan van Eyck, and even more so in Christus' extreme deployment of this device in the *Portrait of a Carthusian*, the trompe l'oeil frame ambiguously retains this function of delimiting the world of the sitter and pretends to locate itself at the level of the material art object. And yet it does not entirely belong to either the sitter's fictional world or the beholder's one. In the *Portrait of a Carthusian*, moreover, the painted frame comes to operate as a sort of window that defines not only the fictional space of the sitter but also a further in-between space – the space in which the light source is located and out of which it shines – located between the cell occupied by the sitter and the space occupied by the beholder: this deceptive counterpoint emphasizes the ambiguity of the different spaces involved in the relationship between the beholder and the painting. At the same time, the painted frame, together with its figurative consequences, constraints and freedoms, underlines the painter's self-aware role in artfully creating, at his will, spaces, objects, barriers and bridges as well as effects of perceived distance and/or closeness (see Sandström 1963; Bann 1989; Bryson 1990; Krüger 2001, 60-79; Degler 2015; Stoichita 2015 (1998)). This frame/window thus bridges, albeit within the painting, different levels of unreality and reality. The "corner space" (Panofsky 1953, 310) occupied by the monk, a space that becomes visible through – and is defined by – the window/frame, is again obtained using cuts and light: the light from the left softly reveals the borders of a shallow cell which unambiguously belongs to the world of the sitter. This frame/window has been the focus of much scholarly attention, all the more so as Petrus Christus asserted its ambiguity to an extreme degree by placing a fly on the painted red sill (Degler 2015, 71-75; see also 77- 114; Thürlemann 1992, 542-543; Kühnel 1989; Chastel 1986; Chastel 1984; Panofsky 1953, 310 n. 5, 319 and 470; Land 1996; Pigler 1964).

The size of the insect [Fig. 1] places it in the world of the viewer; its position on the frame/window's red sill and just above the painter's signature (between PETRUS and XPI), however, locates it within the system of bridges devised by the painter to induce the viewer to move, startled and doubtful, between different levels of unreality, thus simultaneously reinforcing the meta-artistic indicators of the painter's self-awareness. As widely acknowledged in the scholarly literature on the subject, apart from the symbolic meanings embodied by the fly, Petrus Christus' ingenious figurative device has a significant parallel in a long tradition of literary anecdotes from Classical Antiquity that were also reused or reworked in theoretical reflections on art of the early Renaissance: think for instance of the anecdote narrated by Giorgio Vasari about Giotto, who would have deceived Cimabue by adding a fly perched on the nose of a figure previously painted by the master (Vasari, *Vita di Giotto* (Giuntina), Bettarini, Barocchi 1966-1987, vol. II, 124-125, quoted from <https://www.memofonte.it/ricerche/giorgio-vasari/>; the anecdote was recorded by Filarete as well, Finoli, Grassi 1972, book XXIII).

The story about Giotto belongs to a tradition of similar anecdotes recorded by ancient authors, mainly featuring painters from the late Classical times and their technical ability to perfectly imitate nature. One of the most famous examples concerns the contest between Zeuxis and Parrhasios: the former deceived birds with his painted grapes but conceded the victory to his rival Parrhasios because he succeeded in deceiving Zeuxis himself, rather than mindless animals, with a painted curtain made to look as if it was hanging across his painting (Pliny the Elder, NH, 35.65). Even the comment recorded by Philostratus (Philostratus Maior, *Imagines*, I.23.30) on a painting showing a bee on flowers is wholly focused on deception, and the comment is made, moreover, in the context of a story entirely centered on deceptive images, in particular the image produced by nature that led Narcissus to death:

τιμῶσα δὲ ἡ γραφή τὴν ἀλήθειαν καὶ δρόσου τι λείβει ἀπὸ τῶν ἀνθέων, οἷς καὶ μέλιττα ἐφιζάνει τις, οὐκ οἶδα εἴτ' ἐξαπατηθεῖσα ὑπὸ τῆς γραφῆς, εἴτε ἡμᾶς ἐξηπατησθαι χρὴ εἶναι αὐτήν. ἀλλ' ἔστω. Σὲ μέντοι, μειράκιον, οὐ γραφὴ τις ἐξηπάτησεν, οὐδὲ χρώμασιν ἢ κηρῷ προστέθηκας, ἀλλ' ἐκτυπῶσαν σὲ τὸ ὕδωρ, οἷον εἶδες αὐτό, οὐκ οἶσθα οὔτε τὸ τῆς πηγῆς ἐλέγχεις σόφισμα [...]

The painting has such regard for the truth that it even shows drops of dew dripping from the flowers and a bee settling on the flowers – whether a real bee has been deceived by the painted flowers or whether we are to be deceived into thinking that a painted bee is real, I do not know. But let that pass. As for you, however, Narcissus, it is no painting that has deceived you, nor are you engrossed in a thing of pigments or wax; but you do not realize that the water represents you exactly as you are when you gaze upon it, nor do you see through the artifice of the pool [...] (Translation, slightly modified, by A. Fairbanks (ed.), Philostratus the Elder, *Imagines*. Philostratus the Younger, *Imagines*. Callistratus, *Descriptions*, Cambridge, MA 1931).

Anecdotes of this type bring to the fore (as the main criterion of quality) not only the artists' technical ability in imitating – and rivaling – nature, but also their self-awareness and meta-artistic discourse, carried out with visual tools. In this case, the quality of their art is identified relative to their technical ability to produce perfect and deceptive illusions as well as illusionary breakings of those illusions, devices that successfully drive viewers to pay special attention to the relationship between reality and images. This analysis of some of the iconographical and stylistic devices a painter has used to drive viewers to move in and out of his painted illusions has concentrated so far, *exempli gratia*, on the well-investigated mid-15th century case of the *Portrait of a Carthusian* by Petrus Christus. This painting is only one of many possible examples, of course: an analysis of the relationship between painted or real architectural settings, figures and *parerga* in 15th century painting would offer equally fruitful examples (Sandström 1963; Krüger 2001; Degler 2015; Stoichita 2015 (1998)), from Jan Van Eyck's frames to the multiple levels of unreality staged by Masaccio (e.g. in the Fresco of the Holy Trinity in Santa Maria Novella, Florence), Andrea Mantegna (e.g. the St. Mark the Evangelist at the Städelsches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt), or Carlo Crivelli (e.g. the Madonna and Child at the Metropolitan Museum of Art).

III

Keeping in mind the very famous and extensively investigated cases of Petrus Christus and the surge of interest among 15th century painters in visual devices enabling them to display their technical ability and power to produce artistic illusions, as well as to involve the viewer in the game of

moving among different levels of unreality and reality, it might be interesting to look to Classical Antiquity to examine the ways ancient vase painters treated borders and cuts. The post-antique cases I have analyzed differ substantially from ancient figured pottery: apart from the completely different production techniques, the functions of the objects vase painters produced were very different than those of 15th century paintings; for example, the functions of these objects (and the images they bore) entailed physical interaction with their users at multiple levels and in specific social and/or ritual environments. Unlike painting, moreover, the scenes represented on ancient vases never at any level implied an external frame, even in those cases in which they might have been put on display in special cabinets.

Petrus Christus and the 15th century cases mentioned above do, however, represent a valid point of departure for our reflection on Classical Antiquity insofar as they turn the 'frame' into a border, thus relocating it within the pictorial field and putting it in a different and thoroughly guided relationship with the painted narrative. An element that is normally external to the painter's technique (though not necessarily to the painter's choice and control), the frame, is pulled inside the painter's domain and turned into one of the stylistic and iconographic devices available to the painter. An extremely valuable analysis of the varying treatment of borders in ancient Greek painted pottery has recently been carried out by Clemente Marconi (Marconi 2017) as part of an equally useful and stimulating series of reflections on the frame edited by Verity Platt and Michael Squire (Platt, Squire 2017). These publications allow me to concentrate on a highly specific case and experiment. The experiment will be conducted on four wine cups (Attic red-figure *kylix*. Attr. to Epiktetos. Ca. 510 BCE. Malibu, The J. Paul Getty Museum, 86.AE.279. Beazley Addenda2, 168; The Beazley Archive nr. 352426. Attic red-figure *kylix*. Attr. to the Chairias Painter. Ca. 500 BCE. Paris, Louvre L69 MNB 2040. Beazley, ARV2, 176.1; The Beazley Archive nr. 201605. Attic red-figure *kylix*. Attr. to the Brygos Painter. Ca. 490-480 BCE. Oxford, Ashmolean Museum AN 1967.304. Beazley, ARV2, 378.137; The Beazley Archive nr. 204034; Attic red-figure *kylix*. Attr. to the Brygos Painter. Ca. 490 BCE. Malibu the J. Paul Getty Museum 86.AE.286. Beazley Addenda2, 224; The Beazley Archive nr. 275946).

These are objects that, at least ideally, share the same function and it can be postulated that the images they bear were intended to be used in similar ways. The elements to be compared here are the images decorating the inner tondos, images that we must imagine interacting with a number of external elements such as light, the drinker's body, gaze and mood as well as, most importantly, wine. The images decorating the cup's inner tondos must be imagined moving through the surface of the wine, gradually appearing to the drinker's view while also generating different effects and perceptions as the communal drinking and drunkenness progressed.



2 | Attic red-figure *kylix*. Attr. to Epiktetos. Ca. 510 BCE. Malibu, The J. Paul Getty Museum 86.AE.279.

3 | Attic red-figure *kylix*. Attr. to the Chairias Painter. Ca. 500 BCE. Paris, Louvre L69 MNB 2040.

4 | Attic red-figure *kylix*. Attr. to the Brygos Painter. Ca. 490-480 BCE. Oxford, Ashmolean Museum AN 1967.304.

Let us concentrate on the function of the borders represented on these cup tondos, paying special attention to the relationship between the borders and the narratives being represented. In the scene decorating the inner tondo of the cup attributed to Epiktetos [Fig. 2] dating to the end of the 6th century BCE, a simple and subtle linear border frames the figural scene in which a bald, crowned and bearded symposiast, draped in a mantle, reclines to the left while playing a lyre and singing heartily with his head tilted backwards (on the uncertain reading of the inscription, see <https://www.avi.unibas.ch/DB/searchform.html?ID=5206>). The border line delimiting the pictorial field of the tondo seems to interact with the figure rather than functioning as a decorative element belonging to the support, what we might call the world of the cup-user. Indeed, the adult symposiast

is bracing his left foot directly on the tondo's border, and it is the border that actually provides the necessary support to make possible the position of his lower body.

A totally different conception of the function of the tondo's border seems to be at work in the scene decorating the cup attributed to the Chairias Painter [Fig. 3] in which a young crowned symposiast, draped in a mantle, reclines to the left while playing his lyre. Here, the line that defines the figural field of the tondo seems to unambiguously belong to the world of the support, that is, the cup, and functions as a structural constraint for the vase painter who painted the figural scene. This function of the tondo's line can best be observed by focusing on the right part of the reclining figure, where the lower portion of his legs and feet are cut by the tondo's frame and thus not visible.

The cup tondo attributed to the Brygos painter in Oxford [Fig. 4] shows this same unambiguous function of the frame, a thick border decorated with a meander pattern, as an element belonging to the object and not interacting with the represented scene. In this case, the walking stick and the holder of the suspended sponge, strigil and aryballos behind the courting couple are 'cut' as to precisely fit in the space delimited by the tondo's border; both the adult and the boy, on the other hand, rest on a ground line that is independent of and separate from the border of the decorated field. These examples show that, among the cup decoration strategies, both patterns of interaction between the tondo's border and the represented scene were possible between the end of the VI and the beginning of the 5th century BCE. Indeed, both options treat the tondo's frame as a border: the border can either belong firmly to the decorated support and even 'cut' some of the objects in the painted scene, or it can interact with the figures and, in so doing, enter the pictorial field. In both cases, however, the border represents an unsurpassable barrier. In this context, the cases in which such a barrier is explicitly violated become potentially revealing. The inner tondo of a *kylix* in Malibu attributed to the same Brygos painter [Fig. 5] provides an example of how the violation of the tondo's border can be turned by the painter into a pivotal narrative element of the visual representation.



5 | Attic red-figure *kylix*. Attr. to the Brygos Painter. Ca. 490 BCE. Malibu the J. Paul Getty Museum 86.AE.286.
5a,b | Details of Fig. 5.

The tondo is decorated with the scene of Tekmessa coming to cover the body of Ajax, who committed suicide by throwing himself on his sword on the seashore (Most, Ozbeck 2015, with literature; Catoni 2015). Of the two ways we have seen for treating the border of the decorated field, this tondo adopts the second one, that is, the border unambiguously lies outside of the narrative of the figural scene. How strict a compositional constrain is represented by such a line becomes particularly evident if we carefully observe the lower right portions of the scene [Fig. 5a]. The lower edge of the decorated field becomes an internal thin black line where it meets the sandy ground on which part of Ajax' body rests. The detail of Ajax's hair spreading across the ground proves particularly useful for showing that the tondo's frame is treated as an unpassable line: Ajax' hair reaches this thin black groundline but it never touches the inner red line of the tondo's frame. The same is true of Ajax' elbow. On the left hand side of the representation, instead, Ajax' feet icastically and prominently cross the entire width of the framing band, thus conspicuously violating the border of the pictorial field. Apart from the possibility the painter might have been playing a meta-artistic game, here, this vase-painter's technically demanding choice can be seen to play a particularly powerful narrative function: the device of having Ajax' feet violate the tondo's

border augments to an extreme degree the perception of the corpse's rigidity as well as its enormous size, the latter being a physical trait of Ajax that is often mentioned in numerous literary sources (starting with Homer, *Iliad*, 3. 225-229). Not only does Ajax' huge body [Fig. 5] occupy the entire available horizontal pictorial field, but it also strikingly stretches across the entire width of the tondo's lower left border (Fig. 5b), thus invading the space of the support (the cup) and entering the world of the beholder. The visual contrast between the size of the cloth held by Tekmessa and the hero's enormous, rigid corpse is reinforced specifically by the visual device of having Ajax' feet violate the border of the cup's inner tondo, and both pictorial choices offer visual evidence of the narrative assertion of the size of Ajax' body. A number of ancient representations of the episode of Ajax' suicide simply refrain from depicting this physical trait; once the choice is made, instead, to give visual evidence of it, the device used by the Brygos painter in the Malibu cup obviously does not represent the only possible technical solution.



6 | Corinthian cup. Ca. 580 BCE
Basel, Antikenmuseum und
Sammlung Ludwig. Photograph
from: LIMC, II s.v. Aias I, nr.
122.

The painter of a Corinthian cup [Fig. 6] (Corinthian cup. Ca. 580 BCE. Basel, Antikenmuseum und Sammlung Ludwig) dating to the first half of the 6th century BCE, for example, solved the problem of how to represent this particular physical feature of Ajax by establishing a visual comparison between Ajax' standing companions, who discover his corpse, and the hero's markedly oversized body: Ajax

lies face down parallel to the ground, his body bent at the waist and knees, impaled by the sword onto which he threw himself and touching the ground with his toes and forearms. The horizontal extension of the dead body, as well as its unnatural pose and rigidity, are visually emphasized by the contrast with the size of the other figures standing nearby, lined up on both sides of the corpse.

Of course, the two different solutions adopted in the Corinthian cup and the cup in Malibu give rise to evident visual consequences for the whole composition. What matters in the context of this reflection on the role of

borders and cuts is that the Brygos painter resorts to the ingenious device of having Ajax' feet violate the borders of the pictorial field in order to artificially amplify a narrative element, that is, in order to provide visual evidence of the unnatural rigidity and uncommon size of the hero's powerful, majestic body. The violation of a border that is normally meant as a tool for marking and defining the space of the painted narrative thus becomes a narrative element in itself. The exceptional size of Ajax' body is translated by the Brygos Painter into a visual exception, through the violation of the tondo's border.

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English abstract

In this paper the notion of cut is analyzed in terms of its concrete functioning as a device, in the context of four wine cups from the late archaic and early classical times. Starting from the very famous case of the *Portrait of a Carthusian* by Petrus Christus, the function of the illusionistic painted frame is outlined and compared to the function of the borders delimiting the pictorial field in the tondos of the four wine cups analyzed.

keywords | border; frame; red figure vase painting; Petrus Christus; illusionistic painting.

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