

Negative Space and Figure/Ground Relationships

“The first shape drawn on a blank and bounded canvas surface, or picture-plane, by its presence creates a second shape--the remainder of the picture-plane. This first drawn shape, understood as the area of active "thingness", is called a figure, or positive shape; the remaining, passive, "empty" area is called ground, or negative shape.”

-Nathan Goldstein, *The Art of Responsive Drawing*

Useful Terms:

- *Negative space*: The space around and between the subjects of an image. (also referred to as negative shapes)
- *Positive space*: The space that makes up the objects or subjects in an image. (also referred to as positive shapes)
- *Figure vs. Ground*: another way to say positive vs. negative space.
- *Picture plane*: The shape created by the boundary of the page on which you are drawing (generally square or rectangular)

Rubin's vase is a famous set of ambiguous or bi-stable (i.e., reversing) two-dimensional forms developed around 1915 by the Danish psychologist Edgar Rubin, demonstrating the ambiguous figure-ground relationship evident in figure B. Here both the image of the faces in silhouette and the vase are present, but only one can be held in the viewer's mind in a given instant.

A



B

