

Preface

“The boat of my soul staggers.”

There are not many doctoral theses that have attained the status of classics in psychology. One such is Edgar Rubin’s thesis *Synsoplevede Figurer, Visually Experienced Figures*, defended at the University of Copenhagen in 1915. In this book the figure-ground distinction, which still plays a highly important role in perceptual psychology, was first elucidated. The figure-ground distinction has reached beyond the confines of academic research, not least because of Rubin’s illustration of the alternating vase and faces (Fig. 4.5 in this book), now universally known as Rubin’s Vase. This book tells the story of Edgar Rubin’s contributions to psychology, both in his book on *Visually Experienced Figures*, but also in his later career as professor of psychology at the University of Copenhagen in the first half of the twentieth century, contributions ranging widely in perceptual psychology.

In this book, the life and career of Rubin is viewed against his educational background at the University of Copenhagen, where he was taught by three outstanding professors, namely, Harald Høffding, Kristian Kroman, and Alfred Lehmann. Høffding, Kroman, and Lehmann had managed at the turn of the twentieth century to put Copenhagen on the map of important centers of psychological research in Europe. They also saw to it that the education in philosophy and psychology at the University of Copenhagen was second to none available in those years in western universities. The subtitle of the book can thus be taken as referring on the one hand to Rubin’s discovery of the figure-ground distinction, on the other hand as pointing to Rubin as the figure standing out against his teachers and predecessors forming the ground.

Rubin’s contribution to perceptual psychology in his thesis in 1915 was stunningly original, though admittedly somewhat puzzling to his opponents at the defense. This prompted one of them, Alfred Lehmann, to quote Rudyard Kipling’s novel *Kim* on the occasion: “The boat of my soul staggers.”

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All translations from Danish are by the author, except in a few cases otherwise noted. In quoting Danish sources, I follow historical spelling according to which the first letter of nouns was written in upper case until the spelling reform of 1948, in lower case after that. For ease of readability, I have often translated titles of works discussed in the text into English even though they may not be available in that language.

Edgar Rubin and Psychology in Denmark

Figure and Ground

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