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Rückenfigur and the Western Gaze: An Art Historical Study of the Figure Seen from Behind

Zhang Xinyan
UPSI (Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris)

Mohd Zahuri bin Khairani
UPSI (Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris)

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ABSTRACT: The motif of the Rückenfigur—a figure shown from behind, facing into the pictorial space—has become almost synonymous with Caspar David Friedrich and German Romantic landscape painting. Yet as a compositional device and as a visual problem, the Rückenfigur has a deeper, more complex genealogy within Western art. From early experiments in Giotto's frescoes to the domestic interiors of Vermeer and the erotic nudes of Velázquez and Ingres, painters repeatedly turned figures away from the viewer to organise space, withhold narrative information, and complicate the act of looking. In the nineteenth century, Friedrich's landscapes codified the Rückenfigur as a privileged site for negotiating the sublime, the relation between subject and nature, and the temporality of viewing. Subsequent artists—Gustave Caillebotte, Vilhelm Hammershøi, Andrew Wyeth, Edward Hopper and others—reworked this motif in urban, domestic, and psychologically charged contexts, shifting its meaning from Romantic immersion in nature toward alienation, introspection, and modern subjectivity.

This article traces the Rückenfigur as a Western art-historical phenomenon, moving from early antecedents to Romantic codification and modern transformations. Alongside close readings of selected paintings, it draws on theories of spectatorship and embodiment to argue that the Rückenfigur functions as a privileged device for staging the spectator's position and for exploring the tension between identification and distance. Finally, the essay briefly considers the survival of this motif in photography, film, and contemporary art, suggesting that the figure seen from behind remains a powerful means of thinking about seeing, subjectivity, and the limits of representation.

KEYWORDS: Rückenfigur, Caspar David Friedrich, Romantic sublime, Spectatorship, Embodiment, Modern subjectivity, Western painting

1. INTRODUCTION: Turning Away in Order to Look

The Rückenfigur—literally "back-figure" in German—is now a familiar term in art history. It refers to a figure whose back faces the viewer, placed in the foreground of an image while gazing into the depicted world. The viewer is invited, at least ostensibly, to "stand behind" this figure and share its view. The device is closely associated with German Romantic painting and particularly with the landscapes of Caspar David Friedrich, yet scholarship has shown that the motif predates Romanticism and reappears across media and periods.

At one level, the Rückenfigur might seem a simple compositional solution: the back figure points our gaze into depth, activating perspective and narrative. But it also raises more difficult questions. Does the figure really serve as our surrogate, inviting identification and immersion? Or does its turned back assert a barrier, reminding us that what it sees is not fully accessible to us? Art-historical debates often turn on this ambiguity: some authors describe the Rückenfigur as a transparent stand-in for the beholder, while others insist that it stages second-order observation, making us aware that we are looking at someone else who looks.

The aim of this article is to give an art-historical account of the Rückenfigur within Western painting, without recourse to cross-cultural comparison. The essay proceeds in four main movements. First, it traces early Western antecedents in Giotto, Dürer, Vermeer, Velázquez, and Ingres, where figures seen from behind serve to structure space and to withhold narrative information. Second, it examines Friedrich's Romantic codification of the motif as an emblem of the sublime, drawing on influential analyses of the artist and his use of the "halted traveller." Third, it follows the motif into modernity, focusing on urban and domestic Rückenfiguren in Caillebotte, Hammershøi, Wyeth, and Hopper. Fourth, it mobilises phenomenological and spectator-theoretical perspectives to argue that the Rückenfigur has become a key device for thinking about embodiment, spectatorship, and the ethics of looking. A brief concluding section gestures toward the motif's contemporary afterlives in photography and film.

Throughout, the Rückenfigur is treated not as a mere iconographic type, but as a reflective tool: a means by which Western painters have interrogated what it means to look, to be looked at, and to be latecomers in front of images and histories that precede us.

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2. EARLY ANTECEDENTS: GIOTTO TO INGRES

Although the term Rückenfigur is German and Romantic, the compositional device of turning figures away from the viewer appears much earlier. Recent summaries of the motif's history often begin with Giotto's Lamentation (The Mourning of Christ) (c. 1304–1306), in the Scrovegni Chapel, Padua (Fig. 1). Several mourners sit or kneel at the lower edge of the fresco, presenting their backs or three-quarter backs to the viewer, forming a visual barrier and a spatial threshold between us and the dead Christ. Their hunched shoulders and concealed faces create a zone of emotional opacity: grief is indicated, but not legible as individual expression. At the same time, these figures help articulate depth; their turned bodies anchor the foreground and direct the eye toward the central event.

Figure 1

Giotto di Bondone, Lamentation (The Mourning of Christ), c. 1304–1306, fresco, Scrovegni Chapel, Padua, Italy. Public domain image.

In early modern art, artists continued to experiment with figures seen from behind. Albrecht Dürer's engraving Four Naked Women (1497) shows one woman with her back completely turned, while the others form a tightly closed circle around a skull on the floor. The back figure here is less a surrogate for the viewer than a device for protecting a secret narrative space from our gaze. Her turned body participates in a choreography of concealment; what matters is precisely what we are not allowed to see.

Johannes Vermeer's The Art of Painting (c. 1666–1668) offers another important precedent (Fig. 2). The painter is seen only from behind as he paints Clio, the muse of history, in a meticulously ordered studio. The painting within the painting shows Clio in profile, yet Vermeer's painter remains a Rückenfigur for us. We are denied access to his facial expression, perhaps even to his identity. The viewer thus occupies an oblique position: we observe a privileged relationship between artist and model that we can never fully enter. The Rückenfigur here signals both proximity (we are inside the studio) and irreducible distance (we can never take the painter's place).

Figure 2

Johannes Vermeer, The Art of Painting, c. 1666–1668, oil on canvas, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria. Image reproduced from a public domain source or museum image policy as applicable.

In seventeenth-century Spain, Diego Velázquez's so-called Rokeby Venus (c. 1648–1651) developed a different use of the back figure (Fig. 3). Venus lies on her stomach, her naked back exposed to the viewer, facing a mirror held by Cupid. Formally this is a kind of Rückenfigur: the viewer sees the back and must rely on a mediated reflection to glimpse the face. But whereas Giotto's mourners and Vermeer's painter conceal narrative or professional interiority, Velázquez's nude plays with erotic distance. The back both exposes and protects; the reflected face is small, blurred, and arguably less important than the elongated, tactile expanse of the spine. In this instance, the Rückenfigur thematises desire and the limits of possession: the viewer can look, but not touch, and can never fully command the reflected gaze.

Figure 3

Diego Velázquez, The Rokeby Venus (Venus at Her Mirror), c. 1648–1651, oil on canvas, The National Gallery, London, United Kingdom. Image in the public domain.

By the early nineteenth century, the motif had also entered the domain of neoclassical and Romantic nude painting. Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres's Valpinçon Bather (1808) places a seated nude woman with her back turned to the viewer at the centre of the composition (Fig. 4). Her smooth, idealised back is meticulously modelled, bathed in soft light. While the setting is interior and the mood quiet, the logic is similar to Velázquez: the back is a surface that invites contemplation yet denies full access to the subject's interiority. The viewer's desire is channelled into an almost sculptural appreciation of form, while the absent face reinforces an asymmetry between seeing and being seen.

Figure 4

Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, The Valpinçon Bather, 1808, oil on canvas, Musée du Louvre, Paris, France. Image in the public domain.

In these early examples, the back figure is not yet a Romantic wanderer confronting an abyssal landscape. But the compositional logic is already in place: turned bodies create thresholds, screens, and mediations. They can protect secrets, stage professional distance, or eroticise the act of looking. The Rückenfigur is emerging as a figure of partial access—a device that structures not only space, but also the ethics and politics of what is shown and withheld.

3. CASPAR DAVID FRIEDRICH AND THE ROMANTIC CODIFICATION OF THE RÜCKENFIGUR

It is in the work of Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840) that the Rückenfigur becomes a central, almost emblematic, device. Friedrich's landscapes—Wanderer above the Sea of Fog (c. 1817), Two Men Contemplating the Moon (c. 1819–1820), Moonrise by the Sea (1822), Chalk Cliffs on Rügen (1818), Woman at the Window (1822)—are populated by solitary or paired figures seen from behind, facing a sea of fog, a nocturnal sky, or a distant moon. Among these works, Wanderer above the Sea of Fog has become perhaps the most iconic representation of the Rückenfigur (Fig. 5).

The painting shows a male figure standing on a rocky outcrop, his coat buffeted by the wind, looking out over a swirling sea of mist. The landscape is vast yet ambiguous, its forms partly dissolved into fog. The figure's posture is upright, almost heroic, but he is also precariously balanced. We can imagine ourselves standing in his place, yet his central placement and distinctive silhouette resist full substitution. The painting dramatises the Romantic problematic inherited from Kant's theory of the sublime: nature appears overwhelming, yet the moral subject stands above it in thought. The Rückenfigur here is not merely a compositional pointer; it is the hinge between finite, embodied perception and the mind's capacity to conceive of infinity.

Figure 5

Caspar David Friedrich, Wanderer above the Sea of Fog, c. 1817–1818, oil on canvas, Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg, Germany. Image in the public domain.

In works such as Two Men Contemplating the Moon and Moonrise by the Sea, Friedrich multiplies the Rückenfigur, inviting us into a chain of gazes: we look at the figures, who look at the moon or horizon, which in turn seems to gaze back only metaphorically. The very act of contemplating

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nature becomes a theme for the painting; the Rückenfigur is not a transparent mediator but a visible sign of reflection. Joseph Leo Koerner has argued that Friedrich's paintings can be read as allegories of beholding: they picture the act of looking at pictures through the inserted back figures, who become "halted travellers" within both the landscape and the history of art.

Recent scholarship has nuanced this account, emphasising the social and communal dimensions of Friedrich's landscapes as well as their religious and political resonances. The Rückenfigur can be understood not only as a solitary seeker of the sublime, but also as a member of a community, a citizen, or a believer, whose stance toward nature and history is inflected by Protestant theology, nationalist discourse, and the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars. Yet the central point remains: in Friedrich, the Rückenfigur crystallises Romantic anxieties about access to nature, the role of the solitary subject, and the temporality of the sublime. It also codifies a grammar of looking that subsequent artists could adopt, adapt, or contest.

An important contrast arises with works like Woman at the Window, where Friedrich undermines the typical promise of the Rückenfigur. A woman—modelled by the artist's wife—stands with her back to us, gazing out of a window. We see only a portion of the outside world: the masts of ships, perhaps, but no grand vista. The painting converts the Rückenfigur from a figure of open access to a sign of closed interiority, suggesting a private, perhaps inaccessible, inner life rather than cosmic sublimity. In this sense, Friedrich himself already anticipates later domestic and psychological uses of the motif.

4. URBAN WINDOWS AND DOMESTIC INTERIORS: CAILLEBOTTE AND HAMMERSHØI

The nineteenth century did not merely inherit Friedrich's Rückenfigur; it transformed it in response to the rise of the modern city and the changing conditions of everyday life. The figure seen from behind becomes less a Romantic seeker of transcendence and more a spectator of urban spectacle, domestic routine, or opaque social relations.

Gustave Caillebotte's Young Man at His Window (1876) is a canonical post-Friedrich Rückenfigur (Fig. 6). A male figure—often identified as the artist's brother René—stands at a window, back turned to the viewer, looking out onto a Parisian street. The interior furnishings, clothing, and architecture situate the figure within a bourgeois milieu, while the cityscape outside appears both alluring and inaccessible. The figure's posture is less heroic than Friedrich's wanderer; he is a flâneur, an observer of traffic and pedestrians, but also, perhaps, a prisoner of his own social position. The Rückenfigur here articulates the threshold between private interior and public exterior, mediating the spectator's relation to urban modernity.

Figure 6

Gustave Caillebotte, Young Man at His Window, 1876, oil on canvas, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, France. Image in the public domain.

Caillebotte's painting belongs to a broader nineteenth-century fascination with windows and balconies. These architectural elements become privileged sites for negotiating the relation between self and world. The back figure facing the window stands in for the modern viewer whose access to the world is increasingly framed—literally and metaphorically—by architectural apertures, pictorial devices, and eventually photographic and cinematic screens. The Rückenfigur mediates between the safety of the domestic interior and the dynamism of the street, dramatising both curiosity and withdrawal.

In the early twentieth century, Vilhelm Hammershøi's domestic interiors in Copenhagen radicalise this logic. Paintings such as Interior with Young Woman Seen from the Back (c. 1903) repeatedly show the artist's wife, Ida, turned away from us, standing or seated in sparsely furnished rooms, often facing a door, window, or empty wall (Fig. 7). The palette is reduced to greys and muted browns; the compositions are austere, almost minimalist. The works are haunted by a tension between closeness and inaccessibility: we are imagined to stand just behind Ida, yet we are denied any facial expression, any clear narrative.

Figure 7

Vilhelm Hammershøi, Interior with Young Woman Seen from the Back, c. 1903, oil on canvas, Ordrupgaard, Charlottenlund, Denmark. Image in the public domain or reproduced according to museum policy.

If Friedrich's Rückenfigur stages Romantic access to the sublime in nature, Hammershøi's domestic Rückenfigur maps a sublimity of inner life and mental space. The turned back becomes a sign of psychological interiority rather than religious transcendence. The viewer is invited to imagine, but never to verify, the thoughts and feelings of the figure. In this sense, the motif becomes a visual analogue for modernist concerns with subjectivity, interiority, and the opacity of other minds.

The urban and domestic Rückenfigur thus reconfigures the relationship between viewer, figure, and environment. We no longer stand with the wanderer on a mountain peak; we hover in doorways, hallways, balconies, and living rooms. The sublime has moved from mountains and seas to streets and interiors, yet the structural role of the back figure—as a hinge between our view and the depicted world—remains.

5. MODERN SOLITUDE: WYETH AND HOPPER

Twentieth-century Western painting continues to exploit the Rückenfigur to stage solitude, longing, and estrangement. Two artists are particularly instructive: Andrew Wyeth and Edward Hopper.

Wyeth's Christina's World (1948) is not always discussed explicitly under the rubric of Rückenfigur, but it clearly participates in the same logic (Fig. 8). A young woman, her back turned partially toward us, lies in a field facing a distant farmhouse. Her thin arms brace her against the ground; her body appears both determined and frail. The vast field around her, rendered in subdued earth tones, recalls Romantic landscapes, yet the mood is ambiguous: we are unsure whether she is moving toward the house or trapped in an impossible effort. The figure from behind is not a generic surrogate; she is a particular person whose disability and biography complicate any easy projection. The viewer is drawn into her line of sight but also confronted with her limitation. The Rückenfigur becomes a vulnerable body rather than a heroic silhouette, and the field, instead of promising transcendence, suggests the stubborn materiality of distance.

Figure 8

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Andrew Wyeth, Christina's World, 1948, tempera on panel, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, United States. © The Andrew Wyeth Estate/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York (permissions may be required for reproduction).

Edward Hopper's paintings, though less systematically reliant on figures seen strictly from behind, repeatedly show figures turned away or in profile, absorbed in their own thoughts and resistant to our gaze. In works like Morning Sun (1952) or Hotel Room (1931), women sit on beds or chairs, looking out of windows or into space. Even when we see parts of their faces, the logic is Rückenfigur-adjacent: the figures are mentally elsewhere, aligned with a view or thought that we cannot fully share. Hopper's art has been read as a meditation on modern loneliness, the fragmentation of urban life, and the opacity of others. The partial or turned-away figure is central to this effect.

Phenomenologically, these modern Rückenfiguren intensify the tension between identification and separation. We are repeatedly placed behind or beside figures whose absorption in their own world both invites and resists our own absorption. The device thus becomes an instrument for exploring what has been called the "uncanniness of the ordinary": the fact that even banal scenes of looking and sitting contain unfathomable depths of experience.

6. RÜCKENFIGUR, EMBODIMENT, AND SPECTATORSHIP

Up to this point, the essay has traced the Rückenfigur historically. In this section, I turn more explicitly to the question of spectatorship and embodiment, drawing on phenomenological and critical theories of viewing to articulate what is at stake in the figure seen from behind.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception emphasises that vision is always embodied; the seer is also visible, anchored in a particular point of view. The Rückenfigur makes this fact visible within the painting: we see a body that sees, but from a position that cannot coincide exactly with our own. The motif therefore stages a structural asymmetry: we look at someone looking. The painting acknowledges, and thematises, the embodied nature of perception.

For Paul Crowther, visual art is grounded in what he calls "embodied imaging"—the capacity of images to articulate the structures of lived experience, including spatial orientation and bodily presence. The Rückenfigur exemplifies this: it gives a body to the act of looking, inscribing the viewer's potential position into the pictorial field. But crucially, this inscription is never perfect. The back figure is both us and not-us; we can align ourselves with it imaginatively, yet we remain outside the picture plane.

Theorists of images and spectatorship have also underlined the active role of the viewer. W. J. T. Mitchell argues that images "address" us, soliciting our responses and constructing implied beholders. In paintings with Rückenfiguren, this implied beholder is doubled: the Rückenfigur itself is a kind of internal spectator, whose relation to the scene becomes the model (or counter-model) for our own. In this sense, the motif stages "spectatorship within the picture," making visible the mediations that usually remain implicit.

Jacques Rancière's concept of the "emancipated spectator" further complicates the picture. For Rancière, modern aesthetics disrupts the traditional hierarchy between active makers and passive viewers, insisting that spectators are already interpreters, translators, and co-producers of meaning. The Rückenfigur participates in this redistribution of roles: it does not tell us what to see; rather, it presents another spectator whose act of viewing may differ from ours. Facing the back of Friedrich's wanderer or Hammershøi's Ida, we are compelled to imagine their experience without ever fully knowing it. Our own viewing becomes an interpretive, speculative act.

Film and media theory have recognised similar dynamics. Vivian Sobchack, in her phenomenology of film experience, emphasises the reciprocity between viewer and screen: the film "sees" us as we see it. In cinema, the back-turned figure has become a standard trope for staging reflective or contemplative subjectivity, as when a character stands at a window or cliff edge, seen from behind, while the camera lingers. The Rückenfigur thus traverses media, carrying with it the same fundamental problem: what does it mean to see someone seeing?

What emerges from these theoretical engagements is that the Rückenfigur is not simply a stylistic flourish. It is a visual articulation of what one might call "second-order spectatorship": the viewer is asked to behold a beholder, to confront the limits of identification, and to inhabit a space of interpretive uncertainty. This is true in Giotto and Vermeer, in Friedrich and Hammershøi, and in countless modern appropriations.

7. CONTEMPORARY AFTERLIVES: PHOTOGRAPHY, FILM, AND VISUAL CULTURE

Although this article focuses on painting, it would be incomplete not to acknowledge the motif's persistence in contemporary visual culture. Photographers often speak of using a Rückenfigur composition to invite viewers into a scene: a person seen from behind anchors the foreground while indicating the direction of interest in the background. Artistic photography has long exploited the erotic and voyeuristic dimensions of the back figure, from early nudes to contemporary fashion images. The immediacy and potential intrusiveness of the photographic gaze can intensify the oscillation between identification and distance that the motif already encodes.

In film, as noted above, the figure seen from behind has become a cliché for introspection, melancholy, or decision. A protagonist standing at the edge of a city rooftop, or looking out over the sea, signals reflection and uncertainty without revealing specific facial expressions. The Rückenfigur motif thus survives as a flexible visual shorthand for complex emotional states, precisely because it withholds direct access to the face.

At the level of popular culture, the Rückenfigur has become almost ubiquitous: countless posters, advertisements, and social media images show individuals (often women) seen from behind, looking out over city skylines, beaches, or mountain vistas. This ubiquity risks flattening the motif into mere convention. Yet it also attests to the enduring power of the basic structure: a body that looks, a world that stretches out before it, and a viewer positioned just behind, caught between alignment and distance.

8. CONCLUSION: THE ETHICS OF BEING BEHIND

If we step back from this historical survey, a number of threads come into focus. First, the Rückenfigur has a longer Western history than the canonical association with Friedrich might suggest. From Giotto's mourners and Vermeer's painter to Velázquez's Venus and Ingres's bather, the turned back has served as a means of structuring space, protecting secrets, and complicating the viewer's access to the scene. Romanticism did not invent the back figure; it intensified and theorised it.

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Corresponding Author: Zhang Xinyan

Second, Friedrich's landscapes codified the Rückenfigur as a central Romantic device, linking it to the discourse of the sublime and to anxieties about belatedness and mediation. The figure seen from behind became an emblem of the modern subject in nature: at once aspiring to transcendence and aware of its own finitude. Later painters extended this motif into the interiors of the modern city and the psychological spaces of the home, while twentieth-century artists such as Wyeth and Hopper used it to crystallise modern solitude and the fragility of the individual.

Third, theoretical perspectives from phenomenology, image theory, and spectatorship studies help explain why the Rückenfigur is so resilient. By presenting us with another spectator inside the picture, the motif forces us to confront the embodied, partial, and mediated nature of our own viewing. It is an image of someone else's view that we can never fully occupy, and thus a reminder of the limits of empathy and identification.

Finally, the Rückenfigur raises ethical as well as aesthetic questions. To stand behind someone is to be both close and distant, supportive and potentially intrusive. In an age saturated with images of backs—tourists at viewpoints, subjects in advertising, anonymous figures in news photographs—the old Romantic question of who may look at what, and under what conditions, acquires new urgency. The art-historical study of the Rückenfigur in Western painting is therefore not merely an exercise in stylistic genealogy. It is also a way of thinking about how images teach us to inhabit our own position as viewers: not as omniscient observers, but as belated, partial participants in visual worlds that always exceed us.

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