



*Groundwork: A History of the Renaissance Picture.* David Young Kim.  
Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022. 264 pp. \$65.

---

The title of David Kim's book, *Groundwork*, suggests its address of a painting's substratum, the surface upon which artists work on paintings, or the painting process. In this beautifully produced book, Kim indeed addresses these topics. However, he names his intentions with his much more ambitious subtitle, where he declares his book as nothing less than a "history of the Renaissance picture." Kim attempts to provide readers with precisely that. *Groundwork* boldly asks us to revise our thinking on exactly what it was that Renaissance painters thought they were making when they worked their materials and, thus, what it is that their audiences thought when viewing them. In some places, this broad ambition allows for an airiness of expression that clashes with this book's basis in a series of case studies. Throughout, Kim raises questions and mounts arguments that all scholars of Renaissance painting would be remiss not to consider.

Kim begins by urging us past time-honored distinctions between surface and ground, figure and background (or the ground upon which figures stand), foreground and background, Albertian picture plane and hazy distance. This awareness allows an embrace of "groundwork" as "the work entailed in constructing [a painting's] foundation" rather than "a base-level . . . foundation, superseded in interest . . . by that which is built on top" (6). Thus, the unquestioned spatial paradigms that art history has celebrated for centuries—perspective, chiaroscuro, foreshortening, and proportion based on distance—yield to a more holistic painting, all parts of which generate meaning together.

Kim explicates the meanings of the word *ground* in chapter 1 and sequences subsequent chapters chronologically to address gold, landscape, pictured walls, and tenebrism. Each chapter focuses on a single artist or work. With its gilded, stamped, and punctured gold ground, Gentile da Fabriano's Perugia *Madonna and Child with Angels* (ca. 1405) is chapter 2's central painting. Gentile's virtuosic handling of gold exploits its illusory and elusive qualities, its portrayal of the divine. Gold's volatile reflectivity requires a sharp eye, even a "community [or workshop] of viewers" (74), to sort its visual challenges. Kim invokes Alberti's criticism of these qualities in favor of landscape backgrounds, presaging chapter 3's focus on the luminous, rocky, fissured terrain of Giovanni Bellini's masterful *St. Francis in the Desert* (ca. 1476–78). Here, ground becomes literal as the work's lead feature. Kim elides the painting's material ground with Bellini's portrayal of the landscape because they inform one another; like a reflective gold ground, Bellini's varnished white primer illuminates the landscape from beneath. It thus comprises essential content: divine presence. Chapter 4 explores Giovanni Battista Moroni's portraiture, wherein full-length figures stand before gray walls with classicizing accoutrements, symbols, and inscriptions. Per Kim, these devices

enable Moroni to “displace access to [his sitter’s] inner life . . . to the gray ground,” creating “walled figures” and “figured walls” (133). Chapter 5 uses Caravaggesque paintings to explore tenebrism’s concealment of content, its openness to metaphor or projection, its status as a “pocket or receptacle . . . [a] cavity [that] conceals and contains.” Throughout, Kim demonstrates erudition, deploying a broad range of references, from Vitruvius to the modern poet John Hollander. He also shows thorough understandings of technique, early modern art theory and biographies, symbolism, historical context, and their overlaps.

I should warn readers of this text’s exceedingly enjoyable, unrelentingly associative tendency, which borders on acute circumspection. Pulling away from Kim’s rich poetics to assess the whole, one must ask: What does this book teach us? How might Kim’s consciousness of a painting’s ground reframe our interpretation, for example, of a background figure’s meaning? An address of Artemisia Gentileschi’s *Self-Portrait as La Pittura*, where the artist leaves the painting’s ground exposed, painting herself into, onto, and out of it—in the very act of performing Kim’s groundwork, one might say—is a surprising omission, the inclusion of which may have facilitated a more focused understanding of his book’s argument. Moreover, Kim does not acknowledge or build upon Marcia Hall’s career-long, deft syntheses of technique and meaning. Similarly, Otto Pacht’s *Gestaltungsprinzip*, trained as it is on figure-to-ground relationships, receives no acknowledgement.

This book’s strengths, however, are considerable. It moves us past a set of hardened, pervasive assumptions upon which our understanding of Renaissance picturing has rested for too long.

Arthur J. DiFuria, *Savannah College of Art and Design*  
doi:10.1017/rqx.2023.649

*Images of Miraculous Healing in the Early Modern Netherlands.*

Barbara A. Kaminska.

Brill’s Studies on Art, Art History, and Intellectual History 58. Leiden: Brill, 2022. xvi + 268 pp. \$167.

---

In *Images of Miraculous Healing in the Early Modern Netherlands*, Barbara Kaminska situates visual representations of biblical healings at the intersection of several social, cultural, and religious developments. This study argues that, while these works have received little attention in previous scholarship, they played a vital role in shaping early modern Netherlandish views on disability and charity. The author advances this argument by considering not only the iconography of these prints and paintings, but also their ownership and viewing context.