M. C. Escher's "Sky and Water I" illustrates the ambiguity of interpretation that has long fascinated followers of his work. In this 1938 print, background becomes figure and figure becomes background. (And in an interpretation the artist surely did not intend, the "queue" of creatures moving from left to right differentiates into a "stack" of birds and a "stack" of fish, each mirroring, and yet transforming itself into, the other!)

Born in Leewarden, Holland, in 1898, Escher showed an interest in novel approaches to perspective early in his career. He was intrigued by reflection, as evidenced by the mirror-like nature of many of his works. Tessellations—mosaic-like patterns made up of juxtaposed, interlocking pieces forming a coherent whole—also fascinated him. Escher increasingly incorporated tessellations into his work, often combining them with his explorations of perspective and reflection. In "Sky and Water I," for example, a tessellation generates both the figures and the background.

His later work grew more abstract in nature, and his drawings became self-contained systems rather than interpretations of the observable world. Escher continued to work in terms of such "self-referential" art until his death in 1971.

Although unesteemed in art circles, Escher enjoyed great popularity among mathematicians and scientists, who often saw in his art confirmation of principles in their own disciplines. The last decade has seen even greater interest in his work, particularly among computer scientists. This interest is most notably exemplified by Douglas R. Hofstadter's Godel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid, a recent investigation of "minds and machines" that has gained wide attention. Among many other things, the author explains Godel's famous undecidability proof and its significance to scientific thinking. Godel's proof involves recursion, self-reference, and endless regress, themes Hofstadter finds reflected in much of Escher's work.

Escher exploits ambiguity—undecidability, if you will. However, that undecidability leads not to disorder but, as Escher's art shows, to a higher order, to another world of richer possibilities.

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