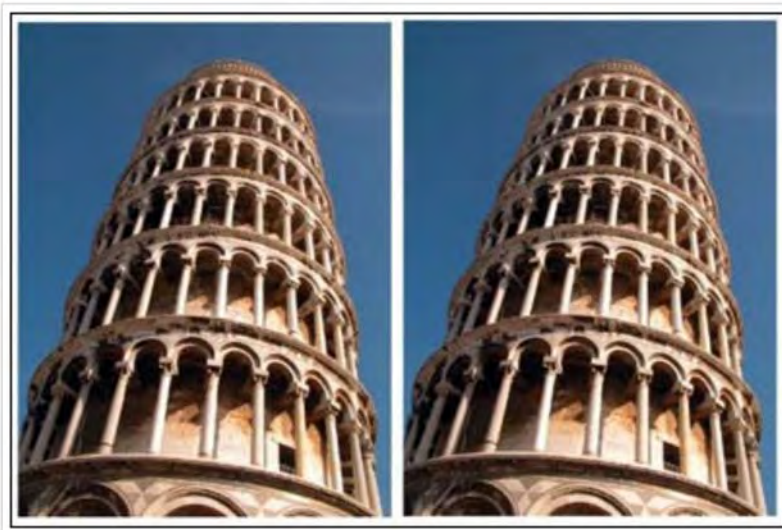


# CARPE DIEM

Professor Mark J. Perry's Blog for Economics and Finance

SUNDAY, AUGUST 23, 2009

## → Best Visual Illusions



**2007 Best Visual Illusion of the Year** -- Here is a novel illusion that is as striking as it is simple. The two images of the Leaning Tower of Pisa are identical, yet one has the impression that the tower on the right leans more, as if photographed from a different angle. The reason for this is because the visual system treats the two images as if part of a single scene. Normally, if two adjacent towers rise at the same angle, their image outlines converge as they recede from view due to perspective, and this is taken into account by the visual system. So when confronted with two towers whose corresponding outlines are parallel, the visual system assumes they must be diverging as they rise from view, and this is what we see.

What this illusion reveals is less to do with perspective, but how the visual system tends to treat two side-by-side images as if part of the same scene. However hard we try to think of the two photographs of the Leaning Tower as separate, albeit identical images of the same object, our visual system regards them as the 'Twin Towers of Pisa', whose perspective can only be interpreted in terms of one tower leaning more than the other.

The Leaning Tower Illusion also works with paired images of train tracks (pictured below), violating the rules of perspective. It's hard to believe, but these are actually identical images of parallel train tracks.

## About Me



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Dr. Mark J. Perry is a professor of economics and finance in the [School of Management](#) at the Flint campus of the [University of Michigan](#). Perry holds two graduate degrees in economics (M.A. and Ph.D.) from [George Mason University](#) near Washington, D.C. In addition, he holds an MBA degree in finance from the [Curtis L. Carlson School of Management](#) at the [University of Minnesota](#). Since 1997, Professor Perry has been a member of the Board of Scholars for the [Mackinac Center for Public Policy](#), a nonpartisan research and public policy institute in Michigan.

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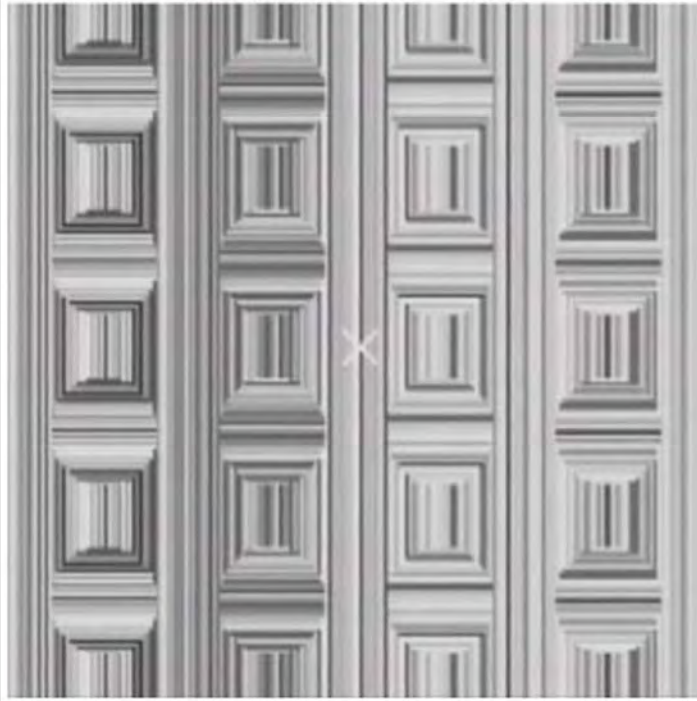
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Although the angles are the same in both images, the brain perceives them as being quite different.



How many circles do you see?



**2006 Finalist** -- First time viewers of this display invariably do not see the 16 circles segmented from the background. Rather, they see a series of rectangles that they frequently describe as "door panels". The illusion pits segmentation cues against what appears to be a very strong prior to interpret the image as a series of 3-D structures "coffers" with closed boundaries. (A coffer is a decorative sunken panel.) It appears that the prior involves both closure and shape-from shading assumptions. The Coffers Illusion is a variation on Gianni Sarcone's "Op Art illusion."

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