

John J. Han

## A VERBAL RESPONSE TO VISUAL ART: THE POPULARITY, TYPES, AND COMPOSITION OF EKPHRASTIC POETRY

### The Rising Popularity of Ekphrastic Poetry

A trendy poetic form today, ekphrastic poetry is usually defined as poetry inspired by visual art. The definition is correct, but John Drury offers a more precise one: “Poetry that imitates, critiques, dramatizes, reflects upon, or otherwise responds to a work of nonliterary art, especially the visual” (“Ekphrastic Poetry” 84). Regarding the objects of ekphrastic poetry, Valentine Cunningham includes an extensive range of nonverbal art forms, including shields, urns, cups, statues, frescoes, tapestries, cartoons, paintings, photographs, movies, buildings, and ruins (57). In reality, however, most of the ekphrastic poems written today draw inspiration from paintings, sculptures, and photographs.

Although ekphrasis began as early as classical times, it has gained much attention during the past two or three decades. A poetic form’s popularity is evidenced in part by the presence of publishing venues. *Ekphrasis—A Poetry Journal* and *The Ekphrastic Review* are two well-known online journals dedicated exclusively to the form. *Ekphrasis* seeks submissions that offer something beyond a detailed account: “Acceptable ekphrastic verse transcends mere description: it stands as [a] transformative critical statement, an original gloss on the individual art piece it addresses” (“Ekphrasis-A Poetry Journal”). *The Ekphrastic Review* defines the ekphrastic style as “the art form of literary writing inspired or prompted by visual art”; a piece of ekphrastic writing “can be an in-depth experience of the art work, or it can use the art as a starting point for expression. The connection to the artwork or artist can be subtle, or it can be central to the work.” The journal considers poems and prose inspired by any visual artwork, including paintings, sculptures, photographs, installations, collages, graffiti, advertisements, posters, and mixed media (*The Ekphrastic Review*).

Meanwhile, poetry societies and municipalities publicize the form of ekphrastic poetry through workshops and contests. At the June 2019 National Federation of State Poetry Societies Convention held in Santa Fe, New Mexico, Jules Nyquist provided a workshop on ekphrastic poetry. Her audience walked the streets of Santa Fe observing and writing about the City Different, the City of Holy Faith (“NFSPS”). Likewise, the Toledo Museum of Art offers an annual ekphrastic poetry contest; the tenth con-

test took place in the spring of 2019. Entrants can submit an original poem based on a work of art in the TMA's collection. The contest's website states, "Ekphrastic writing, or writing about art, was created by the Greeks but popularized by the Romans. The goal of ekphrasis was to make the reader or listener envision a work of art as if it were physically present. Looking at art and describing art is central to being visually literate in our image-saturated world" ("Ekphrastic Poetry Contest").

On the academic side, many creative writing courses across the United States include ekphrastic poetry. For instance, Reed College's Creative Writing 331: Special Topics Studio offers the course Artist/2/Artist: Experiments in Ekphrasis, in which students "will read and discuss a variety of poetry inspired by works of art and explore different ways in which poets can access their own work through the work of others. Each student will choose two visual artists whose work they will engage with deeply, one at a time, for six weeks each" ("Creative Writing Courses"). The University of Arizona's Poetry Center offers Ekphrastic Poetry Workshop, in which students learn to "respond to, incorporate, investigate, embellish, interpret and/or reflect upon a vital work of art" ("Ekphrastic Poetry Workshop").

An increasing number of poets find ekphrasis appealing probably because it pushes the boundaries of poetry by connecting one form of art to another. In a way, ekphrastic poetry is postmodern in its ironic and playful tendency. Moreover, the form allows a poet to present his or her perspective on a visual artwork regardless of the supposed intention of its creator.

### Ekphrastic Poetry as a Device for Description

Ekphrastic poetry began in classical times as a tool for describing artwork. Indeed, the English word *ekphrasis* comes from the ancient Greek word *ἔκφρασις* (*ékphrasis*, "description"). Until the turn of the nineteenth century, most of the ekphrastic poetry in the West gave a vivid account in words what the poet sees in a painting, sculpture, architecture, or some other visual art. Ancient Greek and Roman texts include fine ekphrastic verses based on what Plato calls imitation (*mimesis*) in the *Republic*: poems that vividly describes a work of art. Book 18 of Homer's *Iliad* is a case in point. Here the epic poet portrays the shield of Achilles made by Hephaestus, the god of fire. Before his duel with the Trojan Hector, the Greek warrior wears the shield. Part of Book 18 reads,

Then first he form'd the immense and solid shield;  
Rich various artifice emblazed the field;  
Its utmost verge a threefold circle bound;

A silver chain suspends the massy round;  
 Five ample plates the broad expanse compose,  
 And godlike labours on the surface rose.  
 There shone the image of the master-mind:  
 There earth, there heaven, there ocean he design'd;  
 The unwearied sun, the moon completely round;  
 The starry lights that heaven's high convex crown'd;  
 The Pleiads, Hyads, with the northern team;  
 And great Orion's more refulgent beam;  
 To which, around the axle of the sky,  
 The Bear, revolving, points his golden eye,  
 Still shines exalted on the ethereal plain,  
 Nor bathes his blazing forehead in the main. (Homer 566-67)

In these lines, Homer describes what he sees on the shield. Through his use of sensory details, readers can see not only what is engraved but also the ancient Greeks' life in the cities and their view of the universe and themselves.<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile, in the *Aeneid*, Virgil describes what Aeneas sees in the paintings on the doors of Carthage's temple of Juno:

He saw, in order painted on the wall,  
 Whatever did unhappy Troy befall:  
 The wars that fame around the world had blown,  
 All to the life, and ev'ry leader known.  
 There Agamemnon, Priam here, he spies,  
 And fierce Achilles, who both kings defies.  
 He stopp'd, and weeping said: "O friend! ev'n here  
 The monuments of Trojan woes appear!  
 Our known disasters fill ev'n foreign lands:  
 See there, where old unhappy Priam stands!  
 Ev'n the mute walls relate the warrior's fame,  
 And Trojan griefs the Tyrians' pity claim." (*The Works of Virgil* 137)

Similar to the *Iliad*, the *Aeneid* draws a mental picture of an artwork in this passage. Here we see some of the main characters and events related to the Trojan War.

Medieval poetry also includes a number of ekphrastic poetry. *Beowulf* (ninth century) and Dante's *Divine Comedy* (c. 1308-1320) serve as two

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<sup>1</sup> In the twentieth century, W. H. Auden composed an ekphrastic poem entitled "The Shield of Achilles" based on his observation of Homer's description of the shield.

examples. Written in Old English, *Beowulf* includes a number of ekphrastic lines. In lines 2752-66, Wiglaf enters the dragon's barrow to assist Beowulf. The scene includes an ekphrasis of wall hangings:

And so, I have heard, the son of Weohstan  
Quickly obeyed the command of his languishing  
War-weary lord; he went in his chain-mail  
Under the rock-piled roof of the barrow,  
Exulting in his triumph, and saw beyond the seat  
A treasure-trove of astonishing richness,  
Wall-hangings that were a wonder to behold,  
Glittering gold spread across the ground,  
The old dawn-scorching serpent's den  
Packed with goblets and vessels of the past,  
Tarnished and corroding. Rusty helmets  
All eaten away. Armbands everywhere,  
Artfully wrought. How easily treasure  
Buried in the ground, gold hidden  
However skillfully, can escape from any man! (*Beowulf*, N.pag.)

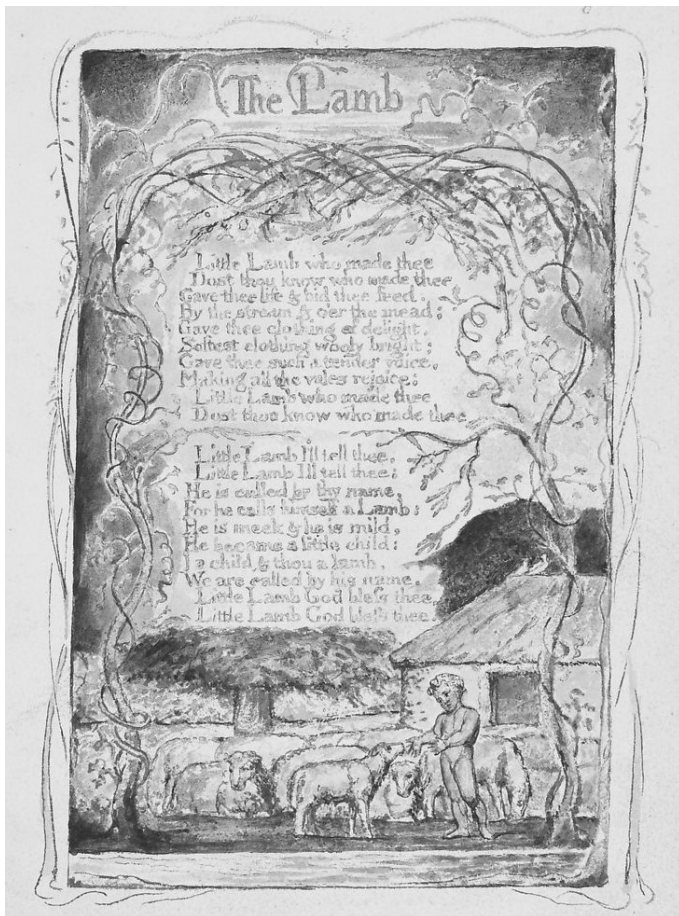
This passage provides readers with clues to part of Scandinavian culture in Old English times: the decorative use of gold, the serpent as a symbol of evil, and armor of the day, among others.

Meanwhile, Dante gives a vivid account of the Gate of Hell in Canto III of the *Inferno*, the first *canticle* (book) of the *Divine Comedy*. Under the guidance of the Roman poet Virgil, Dante walks towards the Gate that leads to the Vestibule, where the morally indecisive are tortured forever. Before he steps into the area, Dante sees a terrifying inscription atop the Gate:

“THROUGH me you pass into the city of woe:  
Through me you pass into eternal pain:  
Through me among the people lost for aye.  
Justice the founder of my fabric moved:  
To rear me was the task of Power divine,  
Supremest Wisdom, and primeval Love.  
Before me things create were none, save things  
Eternal, and eternal I endure.  
All hope abandon, ye who enter here.”  
Such characters, in color dim, I mark'd  
Over a portal's lofty arch inscribed. (Dante 42)

Although the inscription itself is a verbal art, it still constitutes part of a gate—an ekphrastic object—Dante imagines. Unlike Homer, Virgil, and the *Beowulf* poet, whose poetic ekphrasis probably comes from their observations of a concrete artwork, Dante does not portray a real-life scene. Regardless, all of the four poets are comparable in their use of ekphrasis as a descriptive tool.

Among the later poets who use ekphrasis as a tool for description is William Blake. One of the forerunners of the Romantic Movement, he illustrated the *Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience* and many other poems, supplementing his verbal art with visual art. An example is below:



*Songs of Innocence and of Experience: The Lamb* (ca. 1825), by William Blake.

In a way, Blake’s illustrations are similar to haiga, illustrated haiku, which traditionally combine a haiku and ink-brush painting; instead of offering an ekphrasis of someone else’s visual art, he verbalizes his own. Similar to his

Western predecessors, however, Blake composes ekphrastic poetry as an imitation of visual art.

### Ekphrastic Poetry as a Critical Response to an Artwork

Ekphrastic poetry as written today is not merely a verbal representation of a visual art. Rather, it is a critical, subjective response to it. Regardless of the artist's supposed intention, poets may come up with their own understanding of a work of visual art based on their life experiences, perspectives on life, and preoccupations. As in reader response literary criticism, ekphrastic poetry approaches the same work from different but equally valid angles.

John Keats's "Ode to the Grecian Urn" (1820) is one of the best examples of ekphrasis as a critical response to an artwork. In this work, the poet moves beyond a description of an object and offers an emotional response to it. The poem begins with his description of what the poet observes on the surface of an ancient jar but ends with his reflection on the meaning of beauty and truth:

O Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede  
    Of marble men and maidens overwrought,  
With forest branches and the trodden weed;  
    Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought  
As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!  
    When old age shall this generation waste,  
    Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe  
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,  
    Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all  
    Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know. (Keats 1080)

The exact meaning of the last two lines has generated many scholarly debates, yet it is clear that Keats offers not only a description but also a reflection in this poem.

Rainer Maria Rilke's "Archaic Torso of Apollo," published originally in German in 1908, is one of the German poet's "thing-poems" (*Dinggedichte*). The first word of the poem suggests that the perspective is from the modern viewers of the Roman sculpture.

We did not know his legendary head  
in which the eyeballs ripened. But  
his torso still glows like a candelabrum  
in which his gaze only turned low,

holds and gleams. Else could not the curve  
of the breast blind you, nor in the slight turn  
of the loins could a smile be running  
to that middle, which carried procreation.

Else would this stone be standing maimed and short  
under the shoulders' translucent plunge  
nor flimmering like the fell of breasts of prey

nor breaking out of all its contours  
like a star: for there is no place  
that does not see you. You must change your life. (Rilke 1145)

This is an observation of and reflection on an ancient torso Rilke sees in the Louvre Museum in Paris. The headless and limbless sculpture impresses the poet with its inner beauty and power, so he declares that encountering such an evocative artwork can be a life-changing experience.

Another critical ekphrasis is William Carlos Williams's "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus," a poem based on Pieter the Elder Bruegel's painting in the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium in Brussels. Icarus, the son of the master craftsman Daedalus in Greek mythology, disregarded his father's warning not to fly too close to the sun, thereby drowning in the sea. Williams's poem not only retells the story but also fills in the gap by imagining the moment of his drowning:

According to Brueghel  
when Icarus fell  
it was spring

a farmer was ploughing  
his field  
the whole pageantry

of the year was  
awake tingling  
near

the edge of the sea  
concerned  
with itself

sweating in the sun  
that melted  
the wings' wax

unsignificantly  
off the coast  
there was

a splash quite unnoticed  
this was  
Icarus drowning

This poem goes beyond what happens in Greek mythology, instead focusing on how humans and nature respond to someone's personal tragedy: spring has arrived, the farming area is alive again, the sea is busy with itself, and no one notices the fall of Icarus.

"Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" is strikingly akin to W. H. Auden's poem on the same Greek story. In "Musée des Beaux Arts" Auden reflects on a person's woe as something unimportant to others: suffering "takes place / While someone else is eating or opening a / window or just walking dully along" (2689). Then, in the second and final stanza, Auden proves the validity of his observation as he imagines the situation in the Icarus story:

In Breughel's *Icarus*, for instance: how everything turns away  
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may  
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,  
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone  
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green  
Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen  
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,  
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on. (Auden 2690)

Both Williams and Auden present the tragic Greek hero as a man isolated from his environment or other people. They are highly modern in their emphasis on alienation, a theme that runs through modernist writing. Similar to Eliot's Prufrock, Kafka's Gregor Samsa, and the title character in Camus's *L'Étranger* (*The Stranger*), Icarus is in a position to handle his suffering alone. Williams and Auden do more than retelling an ancient Greek story, which many readers already know, to reflect on the human condition in the twentieth century.



## The Steps of Writing an Ekphrastic Poem

Writing an ekphrastic poem is somewhat similar to writing a summary and analysis of a written text: the two modes of writing demand both a factual understanding of the image and the text, respectively, and a convincing critique. Based on a close observation of an artwork, one could simply versify the image—as Homer, Virgil, Dante, and Blake do. However, more often than not, contemporary ekphrastic poems go beyond mere description by interpreting, contextualizing, and imagining the object.

Mary Jo Bang, an acclaimed poet who teaches at Washington University in St. Louis explains her process of writing ekphrastic poems as follows:

In the ekphrastic poems I am taking an existing work of art and rewriting over it. I'm imposing a new narrative on it, one that is partially suggested by the artwork itself and partially by something that comes from within. Sometimes that thing is an autobiographical moment, sometimes it's a larger concern, social or political or intellectual. ("The World Anew")

This is exactly what ekphrastic poets do today: they do more than describing an object.

Specifically, the first step in writing ekphrasis is to understand what is going on in an artwork. The next step is to ask what the work means. Different poets respond to the same object differently based on their life experiences, worldviews, and cultural backgrounds. Interpretive questions include:

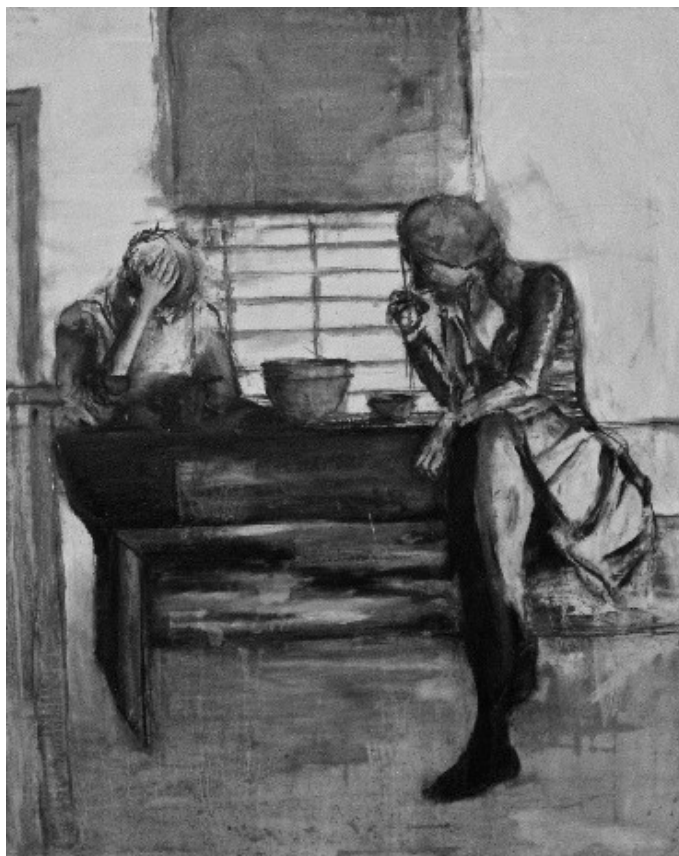
- What is the intended theme of the work?
- What gaps can I fill in as a poet?
- How—and based on what—would I characterize the psychological state of the creator of the artwork or figure(s) in the artwork?
- How is this artwork similar to or different from others?

These questions call for a keen observation, imaginative thinking, and a careful yet bold reimagining of the scene. Well-written ekphrasis can provide the reader with a sufficient understanding of and new insights into a visual art. Art is not something to be deciphered by only so-called experts who may or may not always be objective or informed in their analysis. An artwork is open to every viewer: a college sophomore can find something

important in it that has escaped the attention of many scholars for decades. That is the joy of viewing an artwork with a purpose.

### Contemporary Ekphrastic Writing in Action

Writing ekphrastic poetry can be a rewarding, empowering experience for a poet thanks to the liberty with which he or she can respond to visual art. One can freely describe what is going on without worrying about misinterpreting the object; the same artwork can yield a variety of equally valid interpretations. In fall 2017, *Spare Mule*, the newsletter of the Missouri State Poetry Society, challenged its members to submit ekphrastic poems on the painting below.



*Japanese Couple* by L. K. Sukany. Used by permission of the artist.

Those who contributed poems on this painting did not know either the painter's name or the title of the painting at the time of their writing. It forced the poets to scrutinize the painting itself and try to understand what

is or might be happening in it. Then, several ekphrastic poems on the painting appeared in the January 1, 2018, issue of *Spare Mule*. The issue also revealed that the artwork was *Japanese Couple* by L. K. Sukany. Following are two different poems written in response to the painting:

Home Improvement  
by Todd Sukany

You, my husband  
deep in study  
making ends meet.

I read leaves  
at the bottom  
of bone china.

Many good things  
come in threes:  
reds, bowls, cups—

the rim of-the-present  
the close-to-our sides  
and the depths

in our future.  
Will tea leaves  
herald the hope  
hidden from you  
a rising sun  
growing in me? (Sukany 6-7)

A Dismal Conference  
by John J. Han

The room is murky like  
a foggy November evening.  
A middle-aged couple sits across the table,  
having a conversation that  
goes nowhere.  
The woman leans forward,  
about to drink coffee

and resume her tirade.  
Half hidden behind the table,  
the man writhes in agony.  
She accuses him of a moral lapse,  
mocks him for being incompetent,  
faults him for being insensitive.  
He tries to explain himself in vain.  
His mind wanders off to the green pastures  
of his childhood, the days of pure happiness  
which will never return until he rests underground.  
Her diatribe rings like hums  
of wasps and hornets in Dante's *Inferno*. (Han 6)

In Sukany's poem, the narrator is a wife who consoles her husband as he struggles financially to make ends meet. In contrast, my poem sees something harsh amidst the quiet in the room: the woman needles her husband with a low voice, accusing him of many failures. Obviously, the painter had her intention of creating the painting and could explain which interpretation is the "correct" one. However, ekphrastic poetry is a poet's personal response to a work of art, so the meaning of a painting may not be identical to what the artist had in mind. As exemplified by the two examples above, two poets can generate two radically different interpretations of the same work. For poets, ekphrasis is a liberating poetic form; for readers, it allows them to experience divergent explanations of an artwork.

### In Closing

We live in an age when many people mistakenly believe that interpreting poetry is for supposed experts, such as professors and critics. It is not always easy to engage high school or college students in a discussion of poems, because they are afraid that they are not qualified to interpret them correctly. The lack of lucidity in some poems is partly to blame, and the authoritarian interpretations by supposed experts, such as instructors who have power over students, are to blame as well. Fortunately, with an increasing popularity of Japanese-style short poems (such as haiku, senryu, tanka, and kyoka), budding poets and the public today find poetry approachable and enjoyable. Ekphrastic poetry can be another tool to engage students today, empowering them as they try to understand, imagine, and reimagine an artwork. For the poets who experience writer's block, they may also find ekphrastic poetry a fresh way to generate a poem by simply interacting with visual art.

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