

Describing Art and the Art of Describing: Ekphrasis in Action!

What is ekphrasis?

Ekphrasis [pronounced ek-fra-sis] is roughly translated as “description.” In particular, it indicates the process of using words to describe a work of art, especially when writing about art in a vivid and poetic way. Ekphrastic writing will, ideally, seem to “bring before the viewer’s eyes” the absent image.

When did ekphrasis begin?

Though the word “ekphrasis” is a later coinage, the method of such poetic description of a work of art originated in Ancient Greece. Probably the famous example of ekphrasis comes from a passage of *The Iliad* wherein Homer describes the Shield of Achilles in lavish detail. Though Homer’s evocative description almost certainly did not refer to an existing shield, his passage was the impetus for countless creative endeavors: for instance, during the Renaissance many artists tried to “recreate” the shield using just Homer’s words!

Why is ekphrasis important today?

Ekphrasis truly has never gone out of style since the days of Ancient Greece: art historians, art critics and poets continue to write about works of art using the principles of ekphrasis—vivid, poetic description.

Activity: Putting Words into Pictures, and Pictures into Words:

1. Choose a poem written about a work of art
 - For examples of famous ekphrastic poems, see “The Poet Speaks of Art” webpage at: <http://english.emory.edu/classes/paintings&poems/titlepage.html>; for amateur poems, see “The Ekphrastic Review” webpage at: <http://www.ekphrastic.net/>
2. Display or distribute the poem and lead students through a discussion of what it (potentially) tells us about the image: what elements or objects does it identify? Does it specify a sequence of event that take place? Whose point of view is the poem written from? What is the “mood” here? Etc.
3. Have students then use the poem to inspire their own work of art—perhaps picking a part of it to “illustrate” or even letting the mood or tone they discern to guide their work. Drawing, collage, or even photography could be mediums to use for this project.
4. Students can then share and/or exchange their work, discussing what elements of the poem they used to inspire their piece. The instructor may also share the “original” image the poem was based on, facilitating a discussion here as well: was the image what you expected? How so, or how not? What was left out of the poem that you might have included, had you been the poet?

Example Ekphrastic Poem:

Henry Rousseau, *The Sleeping Gypsy*, 1897
[poem adapted from author J. Patrick Lewis]

Surprised by Moon, but at his ease,
The imperturbable lion sees
A water jar, a mandolin,
The wooden woman in her skin.

He does not put on brute display
His fascination for the prey
That other nights on other dunes
Ruthlessly reddens other moons.

Whatever reasons there may be
For this pastoral scenery,
Midnight capitulates to dawn.
The lion lingers, and moves on.

see following page for image

Options for alternate activities: Step 2 can become its own activity by showing the image immediately following the discussion and proceeding to discuss the relation of poem to image, as in step 4. Students can also practice composing their own ekphrastic writings by reflecting (in a group, or individually) on a particular image—perhaps coming up with describing words initially, and moving towards more formal writing [for tips on different strategies and approaches towards ekphrastic writing, see “14 Ways to Write an Ekphrastic Poem” at <https://martyncrucefix.com/2017/02/03/14-ways-to-write-an-ekphrastic-poem/>]



Henry Rousseau, *The Sleeping Gypsy*, 1897, 4 ¼ x 6 ¾ ft

Ekphrasis Example #2

[poem adapted from author Alarie Tennille]

This night
is never night.
a burning tumbleweed
tossed into the sky, sets cane fields
ablaze against the dark flame
of a cypress – the road a silver
stream.

This quiet
is never quiet.
The moon cups an ear
to hear the muffled French
of men making their way home,
the sound not eclipsed
by the slow hooves of a horse
but by the screams
that reach our eyes
in every brush stroke.



Vincent Van Gogh, *Road with Cypress and Star*, 1890, 36 x 29 in