

*Ekphrasis:
Another Way Toward Poetry*

by Jennifer Bosveld

In *ekphrasis*, or *ekphrastic* art, there are initially two imaginations at work—that of the original artist, and that of the respondent through his/her medium.

For the purpose of this collection and the events that led up to it, I'll talk primarily about writing poetry in response to visual art. That writing may define, redefine, or simply react to (in whatever way feels valid to the writer) the original piece of art. The value of the varied processes involved in visiting the art and making more art from it is immeasurable. My hope is that the reader will take tablet and pen and visit a few galleries as well. But beware, pens aren't permitted in some galleries; although, ask first, you might be given permission to write and to loiter.

Questions asked about ekphrastic poetry

What kind of art can be used for ekphrastic poetry?

You can write in response to the Springprint Company illustrated barns restaurant placemat at the greasy spoon down the street. It's up to you. Writing poetry in response to a play, dance, movie, sculpture, oil or any other kind of painting, wood carving, you name it, can be a grand opportunity to respond with an ekphrastic poem and thereby enhance your experience with the art in addition to making art of your own—word art, poems perhaps. For ease of discussion I'll talk about "paintings" and "drawings."

How scholarly is your take on ekphrasis?

I've studied everything I can get my hands on, and there is disagreement regarding the subtleties of current use of the word *ekphrasis* and *ekphrastic* practices among poets today. I define it broadly—hence, "elastic" ekphrastic.

Little has been available on the subject until recently, but in the past 10 years there's been a resurgence of interest in the word and the experience—so much so that the words "ekphrasis" and "ekphrastic" are making their way back into dictionaries. They were gone from all but the *Oxford* for a long time. And as always, use will rewrite the definitions, so, reader, writer, get busy.

This collection represents some of the work accomplished by poets in our Elastic Ekphrastic workshop—writers from all levels of experience. They responded with autonomy and are now part of that body of poets who define the terms and the experience. This discussion is meant for poets who want to engage in ekphrasis. Mine is a subjective viewpoint that might find disagreement elsewhere on the arts or literary playgrounds.

How does one approach the art in hopes of accomplishing an ekphrastic poem in response?

Become physically comfortable and committed to a long period of time in front of the art. If possible sit in front of the work and attempt to become one with it. If you have permission, take a photograph of it and carry it with you or prop it in front of your computer, especially for the revision process. Since while writing poetry "it all depends on the questions that you ask," ask yourself and ask the painting about the movement in the piece. What is going where? Ask about color, relationships/tension, light, shape/form, subject/items, geometry/direction/balance, taste, sound. Is anything here making noise? Is anyone/anything speaking? Can you create dialogue? Monologue?

If you can't take a photo of a museum or gallery piece, try a "poet's naive sketch" (my term) of the piece just to remind yourself of the elements of the painting—its flow, and relationship of the objects or people. Yours can be a perfectly dreadful attempt as long as it helps you call to mind the original work.

How might I choose one piece of art out of an entire gallery?

Tour the gallery without pen or paper, and after a while, feel the tug toward a particular piece of art. Honor that “tug” by returning to the work and staying with it, studying it as much as possible in the short period of time you have for it. Thirty minutes? An afternoon? Then start taking notes. Does this feel like a picture you want to further explore? Yes? Then it’s yours. Let the piece go to work on you.

A chapter in my book, *Topics For Getting in Touch: A Poetry Therapy Sourcebook*, proposes that making a poem calls upon the same kind of study and diligence that a gemologist uses before cutting a diamond. The process, called “romancing the stone” (called that before the movie was made), demands that you see the object of your affection in every conceivable light and from all angles. Allow yourself to become infatuated with the art the way we do when we’re falling in love. Allow yourself to become vulnerable with it.

There are different approaches, right? Can you simplify an explanation of that?

Choose whether you wish to try the minimalist approach by saying exactly what you see there in as few words as possible (example, Cathy Callaghan’s book, *Other Worlds*, available through Pudding House) or the embellished and flamboyant approach (example, my book, *The Magic Fish*) that allows you to have your way with this art without all that much regard for the artist’s possible message.

Are there additional techniques that could help me make a successful ekphrastic poem?

Minimize adjectives and adverbs and choose only the perfect qualifiers, not overdoing the descriptive just because you’re “interpreting” art. Tap into the senses that might be in the picture. It is easy to write what you “see” but what about smell and taste? Get all the 5 physical senses into your writing.

Try a narrative, writing a story in poetry form about what you see there and beyond, starting long before the action in the painting or long past. Avoid vague language, trite notions, overused expressions. Use strong action verbs and the finest detail regarding the nouns and even presumed proper nouns in the visual art. You may name the subjects even when the visual artist did not. Some say “art is anything you can get away with.”

How do you know you’re understanding what the artist intended?

You might not get it at all, and I don’t know many artists who would care. Most professional artists I’ve known are at least amused by various interpretations of their art, if not flattered or gratified by differing opinions. My recommendation is that the poet should have her way with the art and see what happens. In my work on *The Magic Fish: Poems on an Edward Boccia Sketchbook*, I went with immediate reactions and did not try to interpret the sketch with concern for Edward Boccia’s meaning, though one can always attempt that. Perhaps occasionally I came close to his own story regarding the drawing. Boccia gave me *carte blanche* to have my own experience with the art. This way

you have two different pieces of art, a drawing and a poem, that might meet somewhere on the spread between the two side by side, but that's for the third pair of eyes to decide, isn't it? For the poem to have its highest experience, we might remember that ART is always taking things and altering them. Study the picture, deconstruct it, then put it all back together again your way. It will be valid.

Are there any legal issues when making your own art (poetry) from another's work?

Always include a citation regarding the art: Title, medium, year produced, artist's name, and sometimes the owner of the piece and whether it is on loan and where you saw it exhibited. If you'd like to publish a photo of the work, you'll have to obtain written permission from the artist and/or owner of copyright or owner of the piece. Some artists will not give you permission, but most, I find, are delighted! This is not legal advice, I am not a lawyer. If you are concerned and if you want to take on a serious publishing project, you should consult an attorney.

What is the value of ekphrastic poetry?

Exercising your pen with ekphrastic writing, when it comes down to it, is great practice for empowering your writing regarding any "picture" life presents. "Get the picture?" If your prison administration is wise enough to have left the art and writing programs on the calendar, just see what happens when a group of inmates responds to something out of a stack of prints. It is great practice for poetry therapy group participants—all needs-populations.

"Taking a picture of a moment" is one of my most popular writing exercises for traditional classrooms or special interest groups. Writing in response to a freeze-framed moment of two siblings arguing in the backyard is no different than responding to Georges Seurat's *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of LaGrande Jatte*. It is applicable to our entire lives.

Of course, a major benefit is that ekphrastic poetry brings renewed attention to visual art. It is an excellent way to bring art "back from the dead" or simply to bring additional attention to worthy works, old or new. People who have trouble appreciating "modern art" (as they'll lump it all together with this nondescriptive or incorrectly applied label) could find an enhanced understanding of any work they spend enough time with to write a response. Ekphrastic writing can unlock the mysteries of the painting and grow an appreciation for the art and artist. It is also a way for the poet to go outside the self and respond to something beyond her/his usual experience.

Are the paintings and poems supposed to interact?

If the poet wants them to. The poet may struggle to discover precisely what the artist intended, go wildly in another direction (as I often do), or anything in between. The poem might require the painting to stand beside it in order to get meaning from the poem, or the poem might stand alone.