

The Art of Writing Ekphrastic Poetry

—Janet Ruth, for New Mexico State Poetry Society, Albuquerque Chapter
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I. What Is Ekphrastic Poetry?

ekphrasis – from Ancient Greek, literally “speak out;” the detailed description of an image, usually a work of art or other fabricated object, within a literary work. Interesting fact: *The Iliad* includes about 150 lines describing Achilles’ shield.

ekphrastic poetry – poetry inspired by other creative works

Ekphrastic poetry is a tool, not a form. Therefore, you can use a variety of forms in writing your poems—free verse, prose poem, haibun, sonnet, ghazal, sestina and any other you can think of.

II. What Kinds of Art Can Ekphrastic Poetry Be Written About?

- **Painting/Collage/Weaving/Etc.** – This could be any kind of visual art.
- **Movies/Television** – Example, the anthology, *Moving Images: Poetry Inspired by Film*, edited by Jennifer Maloney and Bart White, Before Your Quiet Eyes Publications (2021) includes poems by Albuquerque Chapter members Scott Wiggerman, John Roche, Sylvia Ramos Cruz and Janet Ruth.
- **Photography**
- **Music/Dance**
- **Sculpture/Pottery/Carving/folk art etc.**
- **Dreams** – the person who included this category called it “notional art,” written to art that doesn’t yet exist.
- **Many Other Possibilities** -- the only exception, ekphrastic poetry does not usually include poems about other literary works of art (other poems, prose, etc.)

III. Perspectives – Ways to Shape Your Ekphrastic Poem

Keep in mind that the following categories are not mutually exclusive.

- **Simple Description** – write about what you see/hear in the piece of art. Talk about the scene or the subject. What catches your attention?
- **Speak in the Voice of a Main/Minor Character** in the piece of art—a persona poem.
- **Speak in the Voice of an Object** in the piece of art—also a persona poem.
- **Write a Dialogue Between Characters** in the piece
- **Speak in the Voice of the Artist** – this could either be about the piece of art specifically, or something the piece makes you think the artist might say.
- **Speak to/interrogate the Artist/the Figures/Yourself**
- **Imagine Beyond the Frame** – what is the story behind or beyond what the artist depicts.
- **Incorporate Research Material** – find information about the artist, interpretations of the piece of art, the historical context of when the art was created, etc.
- **Write About Something Else the Art Reminds You Of** – you can refer to the piece of art directly, indirectly, or not at all.
- **Why Did the Artist Create this Piece?** – speculate on the artist’s intention
- **What is Happening Around the Artist** as he/she is creating?
- **Give an Account of Your Encounter, or that of Other Gallery Visitors**
- **Miscellaneous Other Perspectives** – e.g. write about your memories of a piece of art

IV. Reading/Discussion of Examples

V. Starting Your Own Ekphrastic Poem

- Choose a piece of art (find in a museum, a book, from a Google search, or elsewhere).
- Take some notes on how it makes you feel; what thoughts come into your head as you observe it

- Think about what it might have been like to create it
- Hone in on imagery—not just visual, but olfactory, tactile, auditory, gustatory—all the senses. Try synesthesia—a blending or intermingling of sensory modalities; how do you taste a sound, or smell a feeling?
- Any thoughts on deeper meanings?
- List questions you have about it
- List elements of the work that impress you—colors, shapes, locations, figures, words that come to you
- Juxtapose some of the things you’ve jotted down

Note: There is always a discussion of whether, or how, to credit the artist/piece of art. There are different ways to do this—include a reference in the poem itself, or in the title, or in an epigraph/footnote. Some say it is not necessary. It may depend on where you are thinking of submitting the poem (e.g., *The Ekphrastic Review* has very specific instructions about what to include).

VI. Ekphrastic Poetry Resources and Venues

- ***Rattle’s Ekphrastic Challenge*** – monthly it provides a piece of art and asks for submissions of poems written in response. <https://www.rattle.com/ekphrastic/>
- ***The Ekphrastic Review*** – online journal <https://www.ekphrastic.net/> that accepts submissions of ekphrastic poetry and occasionally provides ekphrastic prompts or hosts a challenge with a specific theme. <https://www.ekphrastic.net/the-ekphrastic-challenges>
The editor, Lorette Luzajic, also offers on-line workshops <https://www.ekphrastic.net/ekphrasticwritingworkshops.html>
- “Ekphrastic Poetry: How to Write an Ekphrastic Poem” <https://writers.com/how-to-write-an-ekphrastic-poem>

EXAMPLES



Pieter Bruegel the Elder (ca. 1525–1569), “The Kermess” or “Peasant Dance”

The Dance

In Breughel's great picture, The Kermess,
the dancers go round, they go round and
around, the squeal and the blare and the
tweedle of bagpipes, a bugle and fiddles
tipping their bellies, (round as the thick-
sided glasses whose wash they impound)
their hips and their bellies off balance
to turn them. Kicking and rolling about
the Fair Grounds, swinging their butts, those
shanks must be sound to bear up under such
rollicking measures, prance as they dance
in Breughel's great picture, The Kermess

--William Carlos Williams

[both art and poem found at AllPoetry.com]



Jeanne Wilkinson, "Cold Sun"

Photo and Poem borrowed from *Rattle's Ekphrastic Challenge*, December 2023

Watch This!

You captured the whole thing on the flippy-est dumb phone,
before you got smart. Fourteen felt like the un-freest zone

of youth: can't drive, can't drink, can't rub two nickels,
can't march to the beat of your harmonious own.

That winter of fourteen, you three trudged through snow,
pushing a Safeway shopping cart up the bunnyest slope,

where the interstate goes under the canyon road. With temps
in the teens, you played Rochambeau, with the runniest nose.

Chomping at the bit, Jake always threw rock.
You always threw scissors. You were the cunningest one.

But Tristan was a lame-o poet, who lived life on paper.
"Me?" he said, voice squeaking in the jumpiest tone.

You were complete dicks back then, scared shitless of being
called chicken, charlatans strutting around the unknown,

your cockscombs uncolored by the foghorned winter sun.
Jake did a DX crotch chop. You were the scummiest clone,

You said *Suck it!* like Triple H and called him a *pussy*.
You mocked him like girls with your honey-est moans.

He climbed in, then dropped, the doppler sound of his voice.
“Watch this!” Tristan said, before breaking his funniest bone.

--Tristan Roth

Aubade with Burning City

South Vietnam, April 29, 1975: Armed Forces Radio played Irving Berlin's "White Christmas" as a code to begin Operation Frequent Wind, the ultimate evacuation of American civilians and Vietnamese refugees by helicopter during the fall of Saigon.

Milkflower petals on the street
like pieces of a girl's dress.

May your days be merry and bright...

He fills a teacup with champagne, brings it to her lips.
Open, he says.

She opens.

Outside, a soldier spits out
his cigarette as footsteps
fill the square like stones fallen from the sky. *May all
your Christmases be white* as the traffic guard
unstraps his holster.

His hand running the hem
of her white dress.

His black eyes.

Her black hair.

A single candle.

Their shadows: two wicks.

A military truck speeds through the intersection, the sound of children
shrieking inside. A bicycle hurled
through a store window. When the dust rises, a black dog
lies in the road, panting. Its hind legs
crushed into the shine
of a white Christmas.

On the nightstand, a sprig of magnolia expands like a secret heard
for the first time.

The treetops glisten and children listen, the chief of police
facedown in a pool of Coca-Cola.
A palm-sized photo of his father soaking
beside his left ear.

The song moving through the city like a widow.
A white... A white... I'm dreaming of a curtain of snow
falling from her shoulders.

Snow crackling against the window. Snow shredded
with gunfire. Red sky.
Snow on the tanks rolling over the city walls.
A helicopter lifting the living just out of reach.

The city so white it is ready for ink.

The radio saying run run run.
Milkflower petals on a black dog
like pieces of a girl's dress.

May your days be merry and bright. She is saying
something neither of them can hear. The hotel rocks
beneath them. The bed a field of ice
cracking.

Don't worry, he says, as the first bomb brightens
their faces, *my brothers have won the war*
and tomorrow...
The lights go out.

I'm dreaming. I'm dreaming...
to hear sleigh bells in the snow...

In the square below: a nun, on fire,
runs silently toward her god —

Open, he says.
She opens.

-- Ocean Vuong
[from Poetry Foundation]



Giovanni Bellini, "St. Francis in the Desert" (about 1480)

The Shepherd's Complaint to St. Francis

Hey, it's me, way over here near the fence.
Who says you're such a mighty holy man
you can just ride up and take my cave
without asking or explaining?

Oh, you were called? If you were called,
go to church. That's the place for the called.
Sure I'm glaring at you. This is my special place.
I waited fifteen years to get this pasture
for my own and now you've ruined it for me.
I like being alone but since you came up here
it's like my mother's telling me not to slouch.

I used to go in that cave at noon
to eat my lunch. Sometimes the rabbit
hopped in, ate my crumbs and radish tops.
I used to see all the sheep from there.

Now you've blocked a clear view
with an arbor and your goddamn desk.

Oh, you like being out in nature with animals?
Well, try that when February's blowing sleet
and the animals are frightened yearling ewes
giving birth in a lean-to at midnight
and you're standing ankle-deep in blood and shit
with candle wax burning your frost-cracked hands
... and you're praying you can save the lambs.

--Faith Kaltenbach (Albuquerque Chapter member), pub. in The Ekphrastic Review
[photo of art from The Frick Collection, NY]

Georgia O'Keeffe, "A Black Bird with Snow
Covered Red Hills"

A Black Bird with Snow-Covered Red Hills

After years shared at a distance,
I am already accustomed

to an empty bed. I summon
the dogs from the morning

melt, their garland of red prints
mudding the floors. Walls

breathe back the stove's heat.
As long as I am here, you can still be

in New York, grouching
about your bowels and feet.

I pull on overshoes, walk, sketch.
You lunch with old friends

at the gallery. I make dinner.
Read. Wear your sweater to bed,

the blue one. Fall asleep writing to you
in my head, of that day, the next,



knees tucked so tight to my chest
I hold my own soles, Cannon-ball!

through the night. And you
are there, taking sun on the dock,

sputtering as my lake-splash
startles you awake. Love,

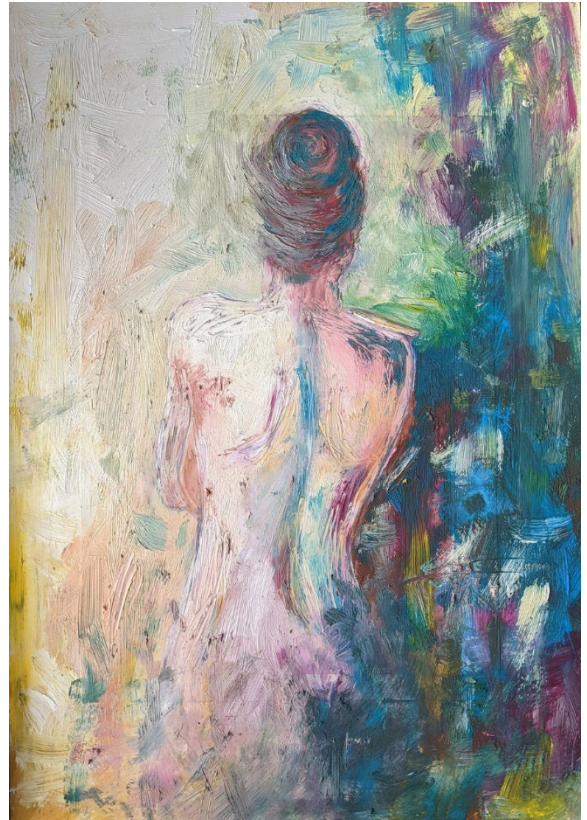
come join me in this water.

--Jessica Jacobs

[poem from J Jacobs' website; photo of art from National Gallery of Art website]

Her Vanity

My mother used to sit like this before
her vanity, her shoulders bathed
in blue and pink light, her powdered skin
dredged in a cloud of talc, breathing it in.
Oblivious at seventeen, she wanted
more than anything to look her best
when Eddie Fisher offered her a Coke
in his posh Manhattan hotel suite.
I sat with her in a room off Times Square
years later, our last outing together
before the nursing homes enchained her.
She told me the story—as she said,
for the umpteenth time—of how she'd met
the singer whose career nosedived the day
Elvis broke the charts with “Heartbreak Hotel.”
They shared a Coke, the story went: his lips
kissing the weightless ‘O’ of the glass
bottle which was furtively snatched up
from where he'd set it down, forgotten it,
by her swift hand. Later, she told us
about the talcosis, how it affected
her breathing. For the rest of her life
she saw a pulmonologist. I sat there
letting her regale me with the tale
of Eddie Fisher *for the umpteenth time*



Natascha Graham, “Anonymous was
a Woman”

in a cheap hotel room off Times Square,
a crooked mirror fixed above the sink
a painting of a woman on the wall
which might have been her, poised
at her vanity, poisoning herself for love.

-- Marc Alan Di Martino

[art and poem borrowed from *Rattle Ekphrastic Challenge*]

In The Georgia O'Keeffe Museum

Two women stroll in front of me arm-in-arm. They pause before a painting stark as bone. One has her eyes closed, a white cane. Her companion whispers in her ear, describing what hangs before them—a horse skull floats in blackness, a white rose blooms where its forehead would be. The first woman listens intently, smiles in response and nods. They move on.

drawing
from imagination
ways of seeing

--Janet Ruth



Georgia O'Keeffe, "Horse's Skull with White Rose" (1931)

[photo of art from Georgia O'Keeffe Museum website]

Standing Female Nude

Six hours like this for a few francs
Belly nipple arse in the window light,
he drains the colour from me. Further to the right
Madame. And do try to be still.
I shall be represented analytically and hung
in great museums. The bourgeoisie will coo
at such an image of a river whore. They call it Art.

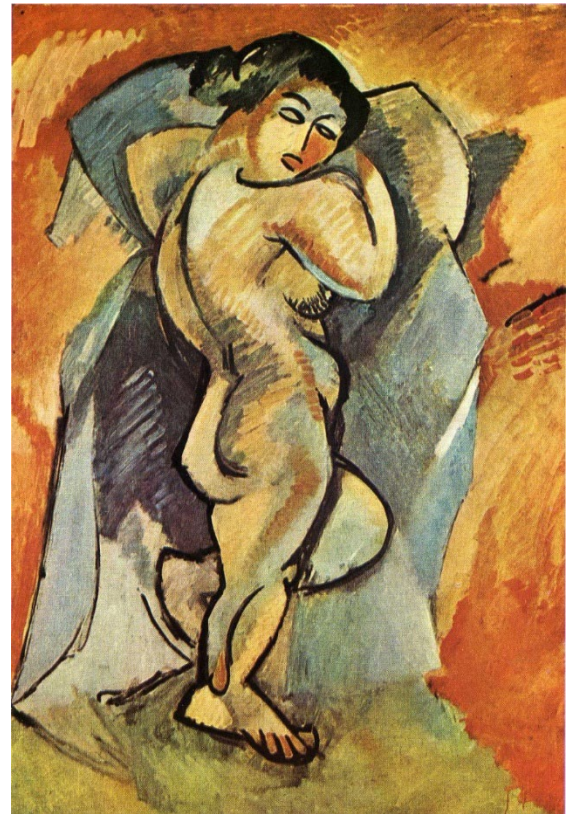
Maybe. He is concerned with volume and space,
I with the next meal. You're getting thin,
Madame, this is not good. My breasts hang
slightly low, the studio is cold. In the tea leaves
I can see the Queen of England gazing
on my shape. Magnificent, she murmurs,
moving on. It makes me laugh. His name

is Georges. They tell me he's a genius.
There are times he does not concentrate
and stiffens for my warmth.
He possesses me on a canvas, as he dips the brush
repeatedly into the paint. Little man,
you've not the money for arts I sell.

Both poor, we make our living how we can.

I ask him, Why do you do this? Because
I have to. There's no choice. Don't talk.
My smile confuses him. These artists
take themselves too seriously. At night, I fill myself
with wine and dance around the bars. When it's finished,
he shows me proudly, lights a cigarette. I say
Twelve francs. And get my shawl. It does not look like me.

--Carol Ann Duffy



Georges Braque, "Large Nude"
[most analyses of this poem suggest
it refers to the Artist George Braque,
and most likely this painting]



Jackson Pollock, "Blue Poles"

Blue Poles

--after Jackson Pollock

Freedom is a prison for the representative *savant*
 addled on bath-tub gin and with retinas inflamed
 from too long staring into the Arizona sun
 or into red dirt which acknowledges no master
 but the attrition of desert winds and melt-water.

Is that why you cast such desperate lariats
 across space, repeatedly anticipating the fall
 into disillusion, the sine wave skewered
 by the oscilloscope, the mirror's hairline fracture?

The West was won and there was nowhere left to go
 so you vanished into a dream of perpetual motion
 knowing that once to touch the surface
 was to break the spell, but that while the colours hung
 on the air an instant, there was no such thing
 as the pushy midwife, the veiled mother in the photograph,
 the rich woman's bleated blandishments.

Tracing the drunken white line at midnight on the highway,
 you were too far gone to contemplate return,
 like Crowhurst aboard the *Electron*; not meaning
 to go to sea, but drawing about you
 such a field of force that there was nothing left to do
 but plant blue poles among the spindrift and iron filings
 and step, clutching your brass chronometer,
 clean off the deck and into the sky
 where a lens rose to meet you like a terrifying eye.

-- Caitríona O'Reilly

[photo of art and poem from Wake Forest Univ. Press]

Anansi the Spider Devours the Hummingbird

The spirits have begun to consume smaller
Suckling forms, those hummingbird wings
buzzing beside her ear. What a racket
Maria never witnessed the act, just what was
whispered to her after she stopped
at the rainforest's edge to find that bird,
smaller than a peach, with its throat torn out.
I've seen how they go for the arteries,
Maria—even praying mantises will grip
a sphinx moth, its wings humming
so loud I thought a bird was trapped
in heavy grass. That perfect sphere
between prey and predator is too incredible.
Maria, you needed to horrify those
armchair naturalists. You gave them
something good to talk about, the only act
of aggression those men could seek to disprove.

-- Alyse Benschel, in *Rare Wondrous Things:
a poetic biography of Maria Sibylla Merian*

[photo of art from Harn Museum of Art website]



Maria Sibylla Merian, "Plate 18,
Guava tree with army ants, pink-toed
tarantulas, and ruby topaz humming-
bird," in *Metamorphosis Insectorum
Surinamensium* (1705)

The Starry Night

—*That does not keep me from having a terrible need of—shall I say the word---religion. Then I go out at night to paint the stars.* Vincent Van Gogh in a letter to his brother

The town does not exist
except where one black-haired tree slips
up like a drowned woman into the hot sky.
The town is silent. The night boils with eleven stars.
Oh starry starry night! This is how
I want to die.

It moves. They are all alive.
Even the moon bulges in its orange irons
to push children, like a god, from its eye.
The old unseen serpent swallows up the stars.
Oh starry starry night! This is how
I want to die:

into that rushing beast of the night,
sucked up by that great dragon, to split
from my life with no flag,
no belly,
no cry.

--Anne Sexton
[Poetry Foundation]

Vincent Van Gogh,
“The Starry Night”

[photo of art
from Wikipedia]

