

Art at home!

Make your own ekphrastic poem

Ekphrasis (ek-frass-is) is a term that applies to any form of art that is inspired by another piece of art. One of the most famous ekphrastic poems is John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," in which the poet reflects on the titular urn and the scenes painted on its surface.

Other notable ekphrastic poems:

"In the Musée des Beaux Arts" by WH Auden after Landscape with the Fall of Icarus by Pieter Brueghel the Elder

"On the Medusa of Leonardo Da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery" by Percy Bysshe Shelley

"Rembrandt's Late Self-Portraits" by Elizabeth Jennings

"The Disquieting Muses" by Sylvia Plath after the painting by De Chirico

Types of ekphrastic poetry

Direct address

This is the approach Keats uses in "Ode on a Grecian Urn." In the poem, the poet asks questions of the figures painted on the surface of the urn. This turns the poem into a sort of dialogue between the art and the poet.

Emotional response

Anne Sexton's poem "Starry Night" is inspired, of course, by Van Gogh's most famous painting.

In this example, the poet does include some description of the painting, but these descriptions are highly emotional in nature – the night is a "rushing beast" and "boils with eleven stars."

Personification

Personification is the act of giving human qualities to non-human objects. In ekphrasis, this can mean that the artwork itself (or the figures featured in the artwork) is able to tell its own story. A good example of this is U. A. Fanthorpe's poem "Not My Best Side," which is written from the perspective of the damsel in distress seen in Paolo Uccello's painting Saint George and the Dragon.

Materials:

- An image of a piece of art that inspires you.
- Paper.
- A writing implement (pencil or pen).

Sweet scent of flowers,
Peace befalls spring-lit hours,
Nature sings a song.

Sit, be, and treasure.

Can you sense nature's pressure?

That still, sanguine mood?

A white bridge abridged,

Japanese inspiration,

Unchanged and sturdy.

Art at home!

How to:

1. Choose a piece of art to write about. Tip: Choose something that speaks to you in one way or another – if it's a piece you love, try and think about why you love it, which details most resonate with you when you look at it.
2. Jot down some ideas for what you want the poem to focus on. Ask yourself: Will the poem be an emotionally-charged description of the whole piece, or will I focus on specific details? Will the poem be serious, or do I want to try for some humor?
3. Decide your perspective for the poem. Ask yourself: Will I be writing as myself, the poet? Or from the perspective of a figure or object in the art work?
4. Pick a style of poem. Tip: Ekphrastic poems can take a lot of forms, so there is really no limit as to what type of poetic pattern you want to follow in your own poem. Some poets may like the structure of a sonnet, or the challenge of a sestina. If you're curious, you can research different poetic forms and see if there's one that you want to use for your ekphrastic poem. Otherwise, you can always just write however you feel like writing. This is called free verse, and it is a great way to get started.

Once you've made all these decisions, it's time to get writing! We would love to see what poems you came up with! Send them to us @asuartmuseum on Facebook and Instagram!

Note:

See the next pages for example poems!

Emotional ekphrastic poem

Art inspiration: The Water Lily Pond (1899) by Claude Monet

Title: Impression of Peace, a Haiku series

Sweet scent of flowers,
Peace befalls spring-lit hours,
Nature sings a song.

Sit, be, and treasure.
Can you sense nature's pressure?
That still, sanguine mood?

A white bridge abridged,
Japanese inspiration,
Unchanged and sturdy.

Oh, birds, bugs, and trees!
A caress from a soft breeze,
They echo and sing.

Vibrant greens, bright pinks,
Through the eyes of an artist.

Cheerful; such delights!

What lovely lilies!
Resting on the clear water,
No view is so nice.

These scenes en plein air,
As unique as each sunrise.
Impressionism.

So, don't dither – go.
Nature's beauty is like prose,
Whether near or far.

This is retrospect;
How motion and calm connect
Like sun-lit gardens.



Direct address ekphrastic poem

Art Inspiration: Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog (1818) by Caspar David Friedrich

Title: Looking for Answers

There's a mysterious wanderer who stands
With one cane, foot aloft the rock,
He looks with adventurous eyes
Or maybe eyes full of scholarly
thoughtfulness
Appeased with the sight of rolling
misty skies
An ocean sits before him,
Swirling in time of the wind
At the top of the world, staring the
far-reaching distance
Up
Up
Up high, I wonder what he's
thinking
How does he feel, standing at what
must be the center of the universe
Where the hills roll down to meet
his eyes.

I ask, "Who are you?"
But no answer comes forth.
Back turned, there is no staged
whisper,
Nor vigorous shout

There is only an aesthetic silence.
Are you like a lighthouse in the
storm at sea,
Calling to those who also seek
what you seek?
An artist, a poet, or maybe an
author?
I stare transfixed as you do
Wondering about this view
With only perspective and
imagination as my cue

Mysterious wander what are you
looking for?
Is it a person, a place, an ideal?
Inspiration, love?
Maybe your true self, which is lost
and must be found?
I can't help but feel envious
For I am not surrounded by
peaceful misty mountains
Where the winds blow and nature
echoes

Dear wanderer what do you plan to
do now?
I am filled with anticipation
Because it's obvious your destined
for exploration
While I am stuck here
In my house with a thirst for the
wilds of the outdoors



Personification ekphrastic poem

Art Inspiration: Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose (1885-86) by John Singer Sargent

Title: The Twilight Messenger

I hope the artist had a good reason to make me look like this.

I am weak, papery thin, and very round.

I look like a fluorescent peach, I call attention to myself.

Around me the sisters giggle as they take me in their small sweaty hands.

I don't mind too much though, it is warm outside.

Hmmm, seeing how they enjoy my presence, I'll concede with the artist's choices.

I do look rather pretty when I eat the fire and burn bright.

Do I sound vain? Maybe.

But oh, can you see how well I compliment the cheerful atmosphere?

My soft pinks and oranges are an accent to the beauty of the flowers,

And the sweetness of childhood.

I am a small sun, ignited by the kindness of children.

In return I give them joy and wonder.

I carry their hopes and dreams,

I represent new beginnings.

Do I sound self-important?

Surely not!

Who else will fill this scene with gentle light?

Surely not the candles, ha!

Clearly this was the artist's intention.

To capture a peaceful moment of life outdoors.

I'm just proud of my job is all.

It is an important one, yes indeed,

No matter how temporary it may be.

With dusk now almost consuming, my colors dance against the grass more.

So soon there will be goodbyes.

I will float away in good cheer,

Delivering these two children's laughter to the stars.

I am the lantern that glitters in the twilight.

