**Lesson Overview: Ekphrastic Poetry**

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| --- |
| **Context for learning*** **Define Ekphrastic Poetry.** Students will understand ekphrastic poetry as a literary form that responds to works of art—going beyond mere description to explore personal and emotional connections.
* **Analyse Artwork**. Students will develop observational skills by closely examining various artworks, learning to notice the obvious visual elements and subtler details and emotions.
* **Engage Creatively**. Students will engage in their own creativity and emotional intelligence by crafting a unique poetic response to a chosen work of art that captures their personal interpretation and emotional response.
* **Appreciate Diverse Perspectives**.Through sharing and discussing their poems, students will learn to appreciate the diversity of their peers’ viewpoints and interpretations, fostering a deeper understanding of poetry and art as a medium for personal and emotional expression.

**Learning areas**Literacy (Poetry Writing), Visual arts**Learning outcomes**Students will be able to:**Define Ekphrastic Poetry**.Explain what ekphrastic poetry is and identify its key characteristics.**Analyse Artwork & Poetry**. Analyse selected or chosen artworks and identify elements such as theme, mood and imagery.Critically read and interpret examples of ekphrastic poetry, noting how poets engage with and represent artwork.**Engage in Creative Writing**Write their own ekphrastic poem, inspired by an artwork of their choice.Use poetic devices such as imagery, metaphor and personification to convey their personal response to the artwork.**Reflect on Artistic Expression**Reflect on the process of translating visual art into written word, considering the challenges and opportunities this form of expression provides.Articulate their personal experience and emotional response to both the artwork and the process of writing ekphrastic poetry.**Participate in Peer Review**Share their ekphrastic poems with peers and provide constructive feedback.**Connect Poetry to Broader Themes**Discuss how ekphrastic poetry can explore broader themes of culture, history, identity and human emotion.Identify connections between the artwork, the poem, and their own life experiences or societal issues. |
| [**Key competencies**](http://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/Curriculum-resources/Financial-capability/Financial-capability-and-the-NZC/Curriculum#3)**Thinking*** Exploring and analysing the themes and imagery in artwork to inspire original poetic interpretations.

**Using Language, Symbols & Text** * Using language & visual art to convey abstract ideas

**Participating and contributing*** Providing feedback on poems.
 | [**Values**](http://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/Curriculum-resources/Financial-capability/Financial-capability-and-the-NZC/Curriculum#4)**Inquiry**Thinking creatively, critically, and reflectively to:* Ask questions about the artwork. What story does this artwork tell? What is my emotional response to it?
* Reflect on the relationship between art & poetry and how the student’s understanding of the painting evolved through inquiry.
* Understand how creativity can be fuelled by curiosity & exploration.
* Inspired by their findings & their personal response, the student crafts a poem.

**Community** **participation*** The student’s poem, along with others from the class, could be compiled into a small publication showcasing young talent within the community.
 |
| **Materials needed*** Introductory material: *Ekphrasis: Poems inspired by Art*.
* *Art and Poetry*: A spreadsheet matching well-known ekphrasis to works of art.
* *Van Gogh’s Bed*: A sample workshop based on Vincent van Gogh’s painting *Bedroom in Arles* and Jane Flanders’ poem “Van Gogh’s Bed.”

All materials were compiled by Margaret Moores for the New Zealand Poetry Society. |

**EKPHRASIS: POEMS INSPIRED BY ART**

**Introduction**

Just before the Second World War, the poet W. H. Auden saw paintings by the sixteenth-century Dutch painter Pieter Brueghel in an art gallery in Brussels. Auden had witnessed the suffering caused by the Sino-Japanese War, which began in 1937, and was in the process of writing about these experiences when he visited the gallery. In his poem, “Musée des Beaux Arts,” Auden writes about the way that ‘The Old Masters,’ like Brueghel, understood that ordinary people carried on with their lives even though others around them were suffering the effects of disaster or war.

Auden’s poem is an example of ekphrasis. (EK-fruh-sis, but frequently also pronounced ek-FRAY-sis). The word ekphrasis comes from the ancient Greek *ek* [meaning out] and *phrazein* [meaning to explain or point out]. It describes a poem or piece of writing that represents a work of visual art such as painting, sculpture, ceramics, or photography by using words in place of the artist’s paint, stone, clay, or film.

Ekphrasis is a very ancient form of poetry that has changed over many centuries. It began as a form of speech-making in ancient Greece and was not necessarily about a real object like a painting or a statue. Instead, the term referred to a skilful orator’s ability to vividly bring an object or scene to life in their listeners’ minds. This skill was called *enargeia.* An example of enargeia from that era can be found in Homer’s *Iliad* (late 8th - early 7th century BCE), where the speaker describes in vivid detail how the god Hephaestus made a shield for Achilles.

But, by the time of Plato and Aristotle in the fourth and fifth centuries BCE, poetry and art were often the joint subjects of critical thought. Two philosophers of antiquity provided concepts that have continued to inspire scholarly debate until the present day. The comment “painting is mute poetry and poetry a speaking picture” is attributed by Plutarch to Simonides of Ceos (556-467 BCE). Horace (65-68 BCE) is responsible for the frequently cited phrase *ut pictura poesis* (as is painting, so is poetry).

Fifteen centuries later, the artist Leonardo da Vinci also thought deeply about the relationship of poetry and art. He argued that painting was superior to poetry because it was like a science. Artists had learned how to depict perspective and could imitate nature with new and brilliant colours — surely a painting was better than a poem? But he also echoed Simonides when he wrote, “Painting is poetry that is seen and not heard, and poetry is a painting which is heard and not seen.”

Over the next few centuries, artists, poets, and scholars continued to think about the different ways in which art and poetry tell stories and represent the world, and more and more poets began writing about how they felt when they viewed works of art.

In the early 19th century, the poet John Keats wrote about his experiences of seeing marble sculptures and pottery from ancient Greece. The Elgin Marbles had recently been displayed in the British Museum, and Keats’s reaction to them is that of a poet seeing something that he found to be both beautiful and sad. The statues, which were examples of an ancient sculptor’s skill, were broken, and this knowledge made him think about his own potential death. He wrote his famous ekphrastic poems “On Seeing the Elgin Marbles” (1817) and “Ode on a Grecian Urn*”* (1819) after this experience. Keats died from tuberculosis in 1821, so he understood that he was unlikely to live a long life when he wrote the poems.

By the time W. H. Auden was writing ekphrasis in the mid-twentieth century, works of art had become much more available for everyone to see. There were more galleries and museums for the public to visit. Photography had been invented and more and more illustrated books about artworks were published. When readers came across ekphrasis, they could read about the works or sometimes see them in person just as the poet had.

In the twenty-first century, images of art can be found even more easily in books, on Instagram and other social media platforms, and on the internet. We don’t need to visit an art gallery or a museum to see paintings, photographs or sculpture like our great-grandparents did. Nor do we need to travel to different countries to see memorials or architectural works.

Writing a poem about an artwork we love to look at helps us understand why we enjoy it. Writing a poem about artwork in which the artist is making a statement about something important to them helps us understand that point of view and assists us to use words to make a similar statement ourselves. Writing a poem about an artwork enables us to think about how the artist is showing us a way to describe experiences in colour, shape or form rather than words.

There are many different ways that poets approach ekphrasis, ranging from ekphrasis of an actual artwork to notional or imaginary ekphrasis. Examples of actual ekphrasis include W. H. Auden’s poem, “Musée des Beaux Arts” inspired by Brueghel’s paintings:

About suffering they were never wrong,

The Old Masters; how well they understood

It’s human position; how it takes place

While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along;

(Auden, W.H. *Selected Poems: Expanded Edition*. Vintage, 2007. P 87)

and Don McLean’s song *Vincent* inspired by Vincent van Gogh’s painting *The Starry Night*:

Starry, starry night

Paint your palette blue and gray

Look out on a summer's day

With eyes that know the darkness in my soul . . .

(*The Seventies: 70 Years of Popular Music,* International Music Publications, 1985, pp. 130-133)

Both W. H. Auden and Don McLean did more than just look at the paintings they wrote about. They thought deeply about what the artists might have been thinking as they made their paintings. Their writing demonstrates how artwork that might be many centuries old can inspire us to think and write about what is happening in modern life.

Examples of notional or imaginary ekphrasis include Robert Browning’s poem “My Last Duchess*,”* in which the poem’s speaker describes an imaginary portrait of his wife:

That’s my last Duchess painted on the wall,

Looking as if she were alive; I call

That piece a wonder, now: Fra Pandolf’s hands

Worked busily a day, and there she stands.

https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43768/my-last-duchess

In this poem, Browning slowly reveals that the duke was almost certainly responsible in some way for the death of the “Last Duchess.”

Aotearoa New Zealand poet Ruth Dallas wrote two poems about photographs of pioneer women who are not identified or used as illustrations in her work. It seems that Dallas was thinking about such photographs in general when she wrote “Photographs of Pioneer Women:”

You can see from their faces

Life was not funny,

The streets, when there were streets,

Tugging at axles,

The settlement ramshackle as a stack of cards.

(Bornholdt, Jenny et al. *An Anthology of New Zealand Poetry in English*. Oxford UP, 1997, pp.322-323)

In her poem “Pioneer Woman with Ferrets,” Dallas describes a woman who is “Preserved in film, /As under glass” and who “…looms / Startling as a moa” in the photograph. In both these poems, Dallas wanted to make a point about the hard lives led by pioneer women whose difficulties were often ignored by historians.

While it is possible to see the Brueghel and Van Gogh paintings that inspired Auden and McLean, you can’t see the portraits or photographs that are important to the Browning and Dallas poems. The poet’s writing makes the images come alive for their readers.

**GETTING STARTED ON WRITING POEMS ABOUT ARTWORKS.**

There is no one right way to write ekphrasis. Ekphrastic poets approach the works of art that inspire them in many ways, ranging from describing the artwork, speaking to the subject or to the artist, to imagining what might be happening behind the scenes as the artist makes their art.

First, find some of the poems in the *Art and Poetry* spreadsheet and look for the paintings or artworks that inspired them. Notice how the artwork becomes part of the poem. Notice, too, how the poet tells us how they are feeling about the artwork.

Below are two poems in which the poet’s response to the artwork revolves around the artist’s use of colour.

In his poem “Vermeer’s Little Girl,” about Johannes Vermeer’s *Girl with a Pearl Earring,* Adam Zagajewski tells us how the pearl made him stop and look closely at the painting:

Vermeer’s little girl, now famous

watches me. A pearl watches me.

The lips of Vermeer’s little girl

are red, moist, and shining.

Oh Vermeer’s little girl, oh pearl,

blue turban: you are all light

and I am made of shadow.

Light looks down on shadow

with forbearance, perhaps pity.

Fragos, Emily (ed). *Art and Artists: Poems*. Everyman’s Library, Pocket Poets, 2012. p.105

Notice how Vermeer’s colours appear in Zagajewski’s poem . . . red, blue, pearl. Notice how he makes Vermeer’s light and shadow reappear in his poem.

Here is another poem about an artist and the colour they used. In his poem, “A Box of Pastels*,*” poet Ted Kooser writes about the work of painter Mary Cassatt:

I once held on my knees a simple wooden box

in which a rainbow lay dusty and broken.

It was a set of pastels that had years before

belonged to the painter Mary Cassatt

and all of the colors she’d used in her work

lay open before me.

If you look at some of Mary Cassatt’s work, you will see, as Kooser did, how she often favoured warm colours like peaches and pinks. Kooser writes that Cassatt has little time for shadows and finishes his poem by telling us:

I touched

the warm dust of those colors, her tools,

and left there with light on the tip of my fingers.

( Fragos, Emily (ed). *Art and Artists: Poems*. Everyman’s Library, Pocket Poets, 2012. p.34

**PHOTOGRAPHS/ FILM AND EKPHRASIS**

Ekphrasis of photographs is an interesting alternative to paintings because a photograph that inspires a poet often does so because of what Roland Barthes called its *punctum*—that aspect of a photograph that strikes you so deeply that it feels like a wound. He writes about a photograph of his mother as a small child and describes the tiny incidental detail of that photograph (she is holding the finger of one hand with the other) that made him instantly recognise something about her character.

Ruth Dallas was inspired by the visual evidence of the hard lives that her pioneering women obviously led. Poet Ted Hughes wrote a poem called “ Six Young Men”—a photograph belonging to his father that showed six friends who had all perished in the First World War. For Hughes, the *punctum* was that the men were pictured on a day out having fun, unaware that six months later, they would all be dead.

It can be very rewarding to take photographs of people you may not know or even of yourself and search for the *punctum* to use as a prompt for a poem about the image. When working with photographs, you can also consider other aspects of film—the way movies use flashbacks and flashforwards to tell a story, for instance, or the way taking selfies enables you to imagine yourself as a different person.

**GENERAL NOTES ON GETTING INTO EKPHRASIS**

Practice responding to a painting.

Describe it.

Make a sketch of it.

Interpret it.

Make up a story about it/ or a dialogue/ what if it were a dream?

Look at details . . . what do they mean to you? What might they have meant to the artist?

Find out about the artist’s life.

Think about the form of the painting and the form of your poem.

What tools does a poet have that resemble the artist’s colours and brushes ?

Further inspiration for working with art can be found in *Paint me a poem/new poems inspired by paintings and sculpture in the Tate.* This useful book contains poems written by children who attended workshops at the Tate led by poet Grace Nichols whose poems also feature. The appendices, “Get Inspired” compiled by Colin Grigg, co-ordinator, Visual Paths at Tate, sets out exercises in locating details, using all the senses and “poem building.”

Nichols, Grace. *Paint me a Poem / new poems inspired by paintings and sculpture in the Tate.* A & C Black, 2004.

**ART WEBSITES:**

Khan Academy

<https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/art-history>

Wikimedia Commons Art

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Art](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category%3AArt)

Google

<https://artsandculture.google.com/>

Google Arts and Culture Experiments allows you to zoom into a painting.

<https://artsandculture.google.com/explore>

<https://artsandculture.google.com/partner/royal-museums-of-fine-arts-of-belgium>

For the poem “Musée des Beaux Arts” and information about Brueghel that would be useful if you wanted to look closer at Auden’s poem.

New York Museum of Modern Art

<https://www.moma.org/>

Tate Gallery

<https://www.tate.org.uk/art>

Te Papa

<https://collections.tepapa.govt.nz/>

**POETRY WEBSITES**

The Poetry Foundation

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/>

Academy of American Poets

<https://poets.org/>

**The Ekphrastic Review**

<https://www.ekphrastic.net/>

The Ekphrastic Review is an online journal devoted entirely to writing inspired by visual art. “Our objective is to promote ekphrastic writing, promote art appreciation, and experience how the two strengthen each other and bring enrichment to every facet of life. We want to inspire more ekphrastic writing and promote the best in ekphrasis far and wide.”

Has ebooks with ekphrastic prompts.

*A Fine Line* NZ Poetry Society Spring 2023 edition: Art/ Mahi Toi

<https://poetrysociety.org.nz/poems-reviews/a-fine-line-quarterly-magazine/>

**SUGGESTED BIBLIOGRAPHY**

**Illustrated Collections**

**Hopkins, Lee Bennett (ed)*. World Make Way: New Poems Inspired by Art from the Metropolitan Museum of Art,* Museum of Modern Art and Adams Books for Young Readers, 2018.**

“Painting is poetry that is seen rather than felt, and poetry is painting that is felt rather than seen.” —Leonardo da Vinci. Based on this simple statement by Leonardo, eighteen poets have written new poems inspired by some of the most popular works in the collection of The Metropolitan Museum.

**Gutterman, Scott, editor. *Sunlight on the River: Poems about paintings. Paintings about Poems*. Prestel, 2015.**

This book contains poems by writers who were inspired by paintings, as well as paintings by artists who were inspired by poems. It includes Rossetti's sonnet based on Botticelli's *Primavera;* Wallace Stevens's meditation on Picasso’s *The Man with the Blue Guitar*; William Carlos Williams's work on scenes by Brueghel; and Adrienne Rich’s poem about Edwin Romanzo Elmer's *The Mourning Chair*.

**Nichols, Grace. *Paint me a Poem / new poems inspired by paintings and sculpture in the Tate.* A & C Black, 2004.**

This book is a celebration of the ways in which art and writing can influence and inspire each other. In 1999-2000, Grace Nichols was the first Writer-in-Residence at the Tate. During this time, she worked with children from London schools, helping them respond to art by writing poetry. She herself was inspired to write over 25 memorable and perceptive new poems collected in this book. In addition, *Paint Me a Poem* contains Grace’s highly personal reflections on the paintings and sculptures, as well as fascinating insights into the inspirations for the paintings, written by Colin Grigg, Head of Young People’s programmes at Tate. Towards the back of the book, there are many lively activities designed to inspire children to write their own poetry and have fun with language.

**Farrell, Kate. editor. *Art & Wonder: An Illustrated Anthology of Visionary Poetry*. Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1996.**

This book is not a collection of ekphrasis, rather, it is a compilation of poems that add meaning to a selection of artworks from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. However, there are some examples of ekphrasis included where the editor selected a poem that had actually been written in response to a particular painting. (“The Master” by Frederick Morgan, written in response to *Night-Shining White,* a handscroll painted in the 8th century by Han Gan (Han Kan) and “Vermeer”by Stephen Mitchell written in response to Vermeer’s *Young Woman with a Water Jug*).

**Collections of ekphrasis.**

Williams, William Carlos, Pictures from Brueghel and Other Poems. New Directions, 1962.

Fragos, Emily (ed). *Art and Artists: Poems*. Everyman’s Pocket Library, 2012.

**The Poet Speaks of Art**

[https://english.emory.edu/classes/paintings&poems/titlepage.html](https://english.emory.edu/classes/paintings%26poems/titlepage.html)

Collection of ekphrastic poems with accompanying thumbnails of the artwork

**WEBSITES WITH LESSON PLANS**

**Ekphrastic Poetry—A Unit for a Creative Writing Seminar** by Laura Brodie, Department of English, Washington & Lee University.

<https://teachingwithucah.academic.wlu.edu/ekphrastic-poetry/>

The J. Paul Getty Museum Education: Connecting Poetry and Art: Ekphrasis: Persuasive Poetry

<https://www.getty.edu/education/teachers/classroom_resources/curricula/poetry_and_art/lesson02.html>

Also: click on the link below to find and download *Poetry Prompt* PDF files: Fourteen Ways to See the Same Thing

<https://www.getty.edu/education/teachers/classroom_resources/curricula/poetry_and_art/index.html>

**Ekphrasis: Using Art to Inspire Poetry** developed by Ann Kelly Cox for NCTE

In this lesson, students explore ekphrasis—writing inspired by art. Students begin by reading and discussing several poems inspired by works of art. Through the discussion, students learn ways in which poets can approach a piece of artwork (for instance, writing about the scene being depicted in the artwork, writing in the voice of the person depicted in the artwork, speaking to the artist or subject of the painting, etc.). Students then search online for pieces of art that inspire them and, in turn, compose a booklet of poems about the pieces they have chosen.

<https://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/ekphrasis-using-inspire-poetry>

**Inside Out Literary Arts**

Developed by Jenna Quatararo for Inside Out Literary Arts

<https://insideoutdetroit.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Jenna-Quartararo-Ekphrastic-Poetry-imagery-Middle-HS-SD-2020.pdf>

**New York Times**

# Lesson of the Day: ‘A Poem (and a Painting) About the Suffering That Hides in Plain Sight’ by Eliza Gabbert.

Begins by looking at Auden’s “Musée des Beaux Arts” and then provides a lesson plan for investigating poems and artwork.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/30/learning/lesson-plans/lesson-of-the-day-a-poem-and-a-painting-about-the-suffering-that-hides-in-plain-sight.html>

# Yale National Initiative

# Reflections Upon Reflections: Ekphrasis as Self-Exploration in Middle School ELA written by Elizabeth Mullin. (Search by title)

**Art and Poetry: An introduction to some well-known ekphrastic poetry.**

Note: Aotearoa New Zealand artists and poets are highlighted in green.

Poems suitable for younger students are highlighted in orange.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Artist | Works | Ekphrasis |
| **Colin McCahon** | Walk Series C | Anahera Gildea: Poroporoaki to the Lord My God: Weaving the Via Dolorosa |
| **Ralph Hotere** |  | Hone Tuwhare: Hotere (from *Come Rain, Hail)* |
|  | No Ordinary Sun  | Hone Tuwhare: No Ordinary Sun (*No Ordinary Sun)* |
|  | NB : Hotere and Tuwhare were friends. Tuwhare wrote about Hotere's work and Hotere used Tuwhare's words in his art. For instance, Hone Tuwhare's poem "Rain" and Ralph Hotere's artworks of the same name; Hone Tuwhare's poem "No Ordinary Sun" and Hotere's painting of the same name. | See *Hotere: Out the Black Window* by Gregory O’Brien. Godwit, 1997 |
| **Marilynn Webb** | Prints*.* See *Marilynn Webb Folded in the Hills* Dunedin Art Gallery | Hone Tuwhare: Poem for Marilynn Webb: Gore, 1986 |
|  |  | Cilla McQueen: Mahinerangi |
|  |  | Ruby Solly: Blank - Silver - Red - Black - Green |
|  |  | essa mae ranapiri: The Water Inside the Shadows Inside the |
|  |  |  |
| **Grahame Sydney** | Wilson Boys Boat | Brian Turner: Wilson Boys Boat |
| **Molly Macalister** | A Māori Figure in a Kaitaka Cloak.  | Hone Tuwhare: To a Māori Figure Cast in Bronze Outside the Chief Post Office, Auckland |
| **unknown** | Notional Ekphrasis: Dallas refers to an unidentified photograph. | Ruth Dallas: Pioneer Woman with Ferrets Photographs of Pioneer Women |
| **Johannes Vermeer** | The Kitchen Maid / The Milk Maid  | Vincent O’Sullivan: Blame Vermeer (*Blame Vermeer*, Victoria UP, 2007. p. 35) |
| **Paul Cézanne** | Grandes Baigneuses (The Large Bathers)[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Paul\_C%C3%A9zanne\_-\_The\_Large\_Bathers\_(Les\_Grandes\_baigneuses)\_-\_BF934\_-\_Barnes\_Foundation.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3APaul_C%C3%A9zanne_-_The_Large_Bathers_%28Les_Grandes_baigneuses%29_-_BF934_-_Barnes_Foundation.jpg) | Jenny Bornholdt: The Bathers (*An Anthology of New Zealand Poetry in English*, Oxford UP, p. 25) |
|  | **International Poets and Artworks** |  |
|  |  |  |
| **Henri Rousseau** | The Dream | Sylvia Plath: Yadwigha, On a Red Couch, Among Lilies |
|  | The Snake Charmer | Sylvia Plath: Snake Charmer |
|  | The Merry Jesters | Kathleen Jamie: Merry Jesters |
|  | Surprised | Susan Utting: Tiger in the National Gallery |
|  | See following page for links to a gallery of Rousseau paintings: | Joni Mitchell: Jungle lines from the Album *A Hissing of Summer Lawns* |
|  | [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Paintings\_by\_Henri\_Rousseau\_by\_title](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category%3APaintings_by_Henri_Rousseau_by_title) |  |
|  | [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:The\_Dream\_(Rousseau)](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category%3AThe_Dream_%28Rousseau%29) | Charles Simic: Henri Rousseau's Bed |
|  | [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Surprised!#/media/File:Surprised-Rousseau.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category%3ASurprised%21#/media/File:Surprised-Rousseau.jpg) | Wallace Stevens: Floral Decorations for Bananas |
|  | [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:The\_Merry\_Jesters#](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category%3AThe_Merry_Jesters) |  |
| **Pieter Brueghel / Breugel the elder** | Landscape with the Fall of Icarus | William Carlos Williams: Landscape with the Fall of Icarus.  |
|  | [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Pieter\_Bruegel\_(I)#/media/File:Pieter\_Bruegel\_de\_Oude\_-\_De\_val\_van\_Icarus.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Pieter_Bruegel_%28I%29#/media/File:Pieter_Bruegel_de_Oude_-_De_val_van_Icarus.jpg) | More Brueghel ekphrasis can be found in William Carlos Williams, Pictures from Brueghel: And other Poems, New Directions Publishing, 1962  |
|  | Auden’s poem also refers to Brueghel's paintings The Census at Bethlehem and The Massacre of the Innocents | W.H.Auden: Musée des Beaux Arts |
|  | [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Pieter\_Bruegel\_(I)#/media/File:Pieter\_Bruegel\_the\_Elder\_-\_Massacre\_of\_the\_Innocents\_-\_Google\_Art\_Project.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Pieter_Bruegel_%28I%29#/media/File:Pieter_Bruegel_the_Elder_-_Massacre_of_the_Innocents_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg) |  |
|  | [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Pieter\_Bruegel\_(I)#/media/File:Pieter\_Bruegel\_the\_Elder\_-\_The\_Numbering\_at\_Bethlehem\_-\_Google\_Art\_Project.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Pieter_Bruegel_%28I%29#/media/File:Pieter_Bruegel_the_Elder_-_The_Numbering_at_Bethlehem_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg) |  |
|  | [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:The\_Hunters\_in\_the\_Snow\_by\_Pieter\_Bruegel\_the\_Elder\_in\_the\_Kunsthistorisches\_Museum](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category%3AThe_Hunters_in_the_Snow_by_Pieter_Bruegel_the_Elder_in_the_Kunsthistorisches_Museum) | John Berryman: Winter Landscape |
| **Edward Hopper** | [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:House\_by\_the\_Railroad](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category%3AHouse_by_the_Railroad) | Edward Hirsch: Edward Hopper and the House by the Railroad (1925) |
|  | [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Nighthawks\_(Edward\_Hopper)#/media/File:Hopper\_Nighthawks.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category%3ANighthawks_%28Edward_Hopper%29#/media/File:Hopper_Nighthawks.jpg) | Andrew Fusek-Peters and Polly Peters: The Nighthawks (after Edward Hopper) |
|  |  | Joyce Carol Oates: Edward Hopper’s Nighthawks, 1942 |
| **Pablo Picasso** | Guernica | A.S. Knowland: Guernica |
|  | [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Guernica\_(Pablo\_Picasso)#](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category%3AGuernica_%28Pablo_Picasso%29) | Ruthven Todd: For Pablo Picasso. The Drawings for Guernica |
|  |  | Norman Rosten: Guernica |
| **Claude Monet**  | Waterlilies | Robert Hayden: Monet’s Waterlilies |
|  | [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Details\_of\_water\_lilies\_paintings\_by\_Monet](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category%3ADetails_of_water_lilies_paintings_by_Monet) |  |
| **Joseph Cornell** | Joseph Cornell's Memory Boxes | Charles Simic: *Dime-Store Alchemy: The Art of Joesph Cornell* |
|  |  | Octavio Paz: Objects & Apparitions |
| **Alberto Giacometti (Sculptor)** | City Square (Bronze) 1948 | May Swenson: The Tall Figures of Giacometti |
| **Vincent Van Gogh** | The Starry Night | Anne Sexton: The Starry Night |
|  | [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Van\_Gogh\_-\_Starry\_Night\_-\_Google\_Art\_Project.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AVan_Gogh_-_Starry_Night_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg) | Don McLean: Vincent (Starry Starry Night)  |
|  |  | Robert Fagles: The Starry Night, Sunflowers |
|  | <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Vincent_van_Gogh#/media/File:Vincent_Van_Gogh_0011.jpg> | Jane Flanders: Van Gogh's Bed |
| **Marc Chagall** | Equestrienne 1931 | Lawrence Ferlinghetti: Don't Let that Horse eat the Violin |
|  | The Bride | Paul Eluard: To Marc Chagall |
| **Maya Lin (Architect)** | The Vietnam Veterans Memorial | Yusef Komunyakaa: Facing It |
|  |  | Rebecca Kai Dotlich: Whispers to the Wall |
| **Edwin Romanzo Elmer** | Mourning Picture | Adrienne Rich: Mourning Picture |
| **Diego Velázquez** | [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Diego\_Vel%C3%A1zquez\_-\_Kitchen\_Scene\_with\_the\_Supper\_in\_Emmaus\_-\_WGA24358.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3ADiego_Vel%C3%A1zquez_-_Kitchen_Scene_with_the_Supper_in_Emmaus_-_WGA24358.jpg) | Natasha Trethewey: Kitchen Maid with Supper at Emmaus |
|  |  |  |
| **Nick Ut (Photographer)** | Photograph of Kim Phuc outside the village Of Trang Bang 1972 | Kate Daniels: War Photograph |
|  |  | Louis de Paor: The Changeling (Iarlais) |
| **Gustav Klimt** | The Kiss | Sasha Pimentel: The Kiss |
|  | [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The\_Kiss\_-\_Gustav\_Klimt\_-\_Google\_Cultural\_Institute.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AThe_Kiss_-_Gustav_Klimt_-_Google_Cultural_Institute.jpg) | Lawrence Ferlinghetti: Short Story on a Painting of Gustav Klimt |
|  | Mäda Primavesi*,* 1912-13[*https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Gustav\_Klimt#/media/File:Gustav\_Klimt\_050.jpg*](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Gustav_Klimt#/media/File:Gustav_Klimt_050.jpg) | Marilyn Singer: Paint Me (World *Make Way: New Poems Inspired by Art from the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, edited by Lee Bennett Hopkins. Abrams, 2018, pp.6-7) |
| **Francisco de Goya** | [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Viejos\_comiendo\_sopa.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AViejos_comiendo_sopa.jpg) | Mona Van Duyn: Goya's "Two Old People Eating Soup." |
|  | For a Gallery of Goya paintings Particularly the History Paintings and the "Black Paintings”: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Francisco_de_Goya> | Lawrence Ferlinghetti: In Goya's Greatest Scenes We Seem to See |
| **Njorowa or Ndimu (Body Plate/ Mask)** | The Bareiss Family Collection of African Art | Kwame Dawes: Body Mask |
| **Grant Wood** | American Gothic [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:American\_Gothic\_(Grant\_Wood)](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category%3AAmerican_Gothic_%28Grant_Wood%29) | John Stone: American Gothic |
| **Johannes Vermeer** | Girl with a Pearl Earring: | Adam Zagajewski: Vermeer's Little Girl |
|  | <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Johannes_Vermeer#/media/File:Jan_Vermeer_van_Delft_007.jpg> |  |
|  | <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Johannes_Vermeer#/media/File:Johannes_Vermeer_-_Het_melkmeisje_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg> | Wislawa Szymborska: Vermeer |
|  | Young Woman with a Water Jug  | Stephen Mitchell: Vermeer |
|  | <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Woman_with_a_Water_Jug#/media/File:Jan_Vermeer_van_Delft_019.jpg> |  |
| **Winslow Homer** | The Veteran in a New Field:  | Ted Kooser: The Veteran in a New Field |
|  | [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Winslow\_Homer\_-\_The\_Veteran\_in\_a\_New\_Field.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AWinslow_Homer_-_The_Veteran_in_a_New_Field.jpg) |  |
|  | The Sharpshooter | Ted Kooser: Sharpshooter |
| **Paul Cézanne** | L’Estaque:  | Allen Ginsberg: Cézanne's Ports. |
|  | [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Le\_Golfe\_de\_Marseille\_vu\_de\_l%27Estaque,\_par\_Paul\_C%C3%A9zanne,\_FWN\_119.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3ALe_Golfe_de_Marseille_vu_de_l%27Estaque%2C_par_Paul_C%C3%A9zanne%2C_FWN_119.jpg) | Charles Wright: Homage to Paul Cézanne |
| **Leonardo da Vinci** | Mona Lisa | John Stone: Three for the Mona Lisa |
| **Jackson Pollock** | Blue Poles (Number 11, 1952) | Inger Christensen: Blue Poles |
| **Mary Cassatt** | For a Gallery of Cassatt Paintings: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Mary_Cassatt> | Ted Kooser: A Box of Pastels |
| **Andrew Wyeth** | Milk Cans  | Robert Wilbur: Wyeth's Milk Cans |
| **Katsushika Hokusai** | [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:The\_Great\_Wave\_off\_Kanagawa,\_Rijksmuseum#/media/File:De\_grote\_golf\_bij\_Kanagawa-Rijksmuseum\_RP-P-1956-733.jpeg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category%3AThe_Great_Wave_off_Kanagawa%2C_Rijksmuseum#/media/File:De_grote_golf_bij_Kanagawa-Rijksmuseum_RP-P-1956-733.jpeg) | Donald Finkel: The Great Wave: Hokusai |
| **unknown** | Notional Ekphrasis: Atwood refers to an unknown photograph. | Margaret Atwood: This is a Photograph of Me |
| **unknown** | Notional Ekphrasis: Duffy refers to photographer Don McCullin and his photographs from war zones but does not identify one in particular. | Carol Ann Duffy: War Photographer |
| **unknown** | Notional Ekphrasis: Hughes refers to a family photograph he saw while growing up. | Ted Hughes: Six Young Men |
| **E. J Bellocq** | Photographs of young women in early 20th century New Orleans' Brothel | Natasha Trethewey: Poems from *Bellocq's Ophelia*Bellocq's OpheliaNB: Trethewey was US Poet Laureate and the book an ALA Notable Book Award Winner 2003. |
| **Han Gan (Han Kan)** | Night-Shining White | Frederick Morgan: The Master |
| **unknown** | Notional ekphrasis: Flanders refers to an unknown photograph. Very similar to Ruth Dallas's "Pioneer Women" | Jane Flanders: Ancestors (A Daguerreotype) |
| **Marcel Duchamp** | Nude Descending a Staircase [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Duchamp\_-\_Nude\_Descending\_a\_Staircase.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File%3ADuchamp_-_Nude_Descending_a_Staircase.jpg) | X. J. Kennedy: Nude Descending a Staircase |
| **Rembrandt**  | [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Self-portrait\_(Rembrandt,\_1660)](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category%3ASelf-portrait_%28Rembrandt%2C_1660%29) | Elizabeth Jennings: Rembrandt's Late Self-Portraits |
| **Michael Goldberg** | Sardines(an artist /poet collaboration) | Frank O' Hara: Why I Am Not a Painter |
| **Charles Demuth** | <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Charles_Demuth#/media/File:NY_Met_demuth_figure_5_gold.JPG>NB This is an example of an artist taking inspiration from a poet. | William Carlos Williams: The Great Figure |
| **Kathe Kollwitz** | [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Works\_by\_K%C3%A4the\_Kollwitz](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category%3AWorks_by_K%C3%A4the_Kollwitz)  | Robert Hass: Museum (Human *Wishes*, Ecco, 1989. p. 18) |
| **Andy Warhol** | Marilyn Diptych | David Harrison: It's Me! |
| **Hans Hoffmann** | A Hedgehog:[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hans\_Hoffmann\_-\_Hedgehog.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AHans_Hoffmann_-_Hedgehog.jpg)  | W.S. Merwin: Identity |

**Van Gogh’s Bed**

*The Painting and a Poem*

In 1888, Vincent van Gogh wrote to his brother Theo to tell him that he had made a painting of his bedroom in his ‘Yellow House’ in the town of Arles in France. Van Gogh had only just moved into the house and he immediately began painting the walls and decorating them with his paintings. Once he had some furniture, he produced the painting *Bedroom in Arles* and wrote to his brother about the furnishings and the colour of the walls and floor.

Van Gogh was very pleased with the painting, and it was much admired by fellow artist Paul Gaugin. Eventually, he made two copies, a smaller one for his mother and sister, and the other because the original had been damaged by a flood. All three paintings still exist.

“Van Gogh’s Bed” is a poem by American poet Jane Flanders.

**Van Gogh’s Bed**

is orange,
like Cinderella’s coach, like
the sun when he looked it
straight in the eye.

is narrow, he sleeps alone,
tossing between two pillows,
while it carried him
bumpily to the ball.

is clumsy,
but friendly. A peasant
built the frame; and old wife beat
the mattress till it rose like meringue.

is empty,
morning light pours in
like wine, melody, fragrance,
the memory of happiness.

From *Timepiece*, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1988

Anthologised in: *Sunlight on the River,* edited by Scott Gutterman, pp. 78 -79.

**Introduction:**

In her essay “From Art to Poetry: ‘Prance as they Dance,’” American teacher and educator Marilyn J. Hollman describes her process of encouraging students to write poems in response to works of art. Hollman notes that she introduces the idea of poems about works of art to her students by giving them time to investigate slides and books of reproductions alongside poems that allude to them before encouraging them to find a particular piece of art to focus on for their own poems.

What comes first in the initial investigation—painting or poem? Hollman writes that for her students, the painting comes first. She discusses the importance of “looking time:”

The instructor might ask questions during the looking time: Well, what do you see? What just happened? What will happen next? What’s the relationship of the people in the painting? What do you imagine about her past? His present state of mind? What else does the scene remind you of? How else can you see it? How would you describe the colors? What design elements do you see as you look? What strikes you the most? If you wrote a poem responding to this art, how would you convey that ‘one thing’? (25)

Hollman observes that for herself, the poem comes first and then she finds the art. She makes the point that if teachers chose to work that way with their students, “the poems provide readers and viewers with a kind of atlas for seeing.” (26). Hollman illustrates what she means by using a line from X. J. Kennedy’s poem “Nude Descending a Staircase,” written in response to Marcel Duchamp’s painting of the same name.

Kennedy wrote:

 Toe after toe, a snowing flesh,
 a gold of lemon, root and rind,
 she sifts in sunlight down the stairs (1-3)

Hollman asks, “What word describes the way the nude descends the stairs?”

Hollman further emphasises the importance of the originating art and the students’ personal choices of that art:

In these paintings, sculptures, or photographs, they encounter a piece of the world already shaped. Order has been imposed, details chosen; the undifferentiated landscapes of the world in which we see and feel have been particularized, composed if you will. This frees the writer to confront the feeling, to enter the landscape, to concentrate on language to respond to or describe the world. The art, and perhaps the questions and talk that precede the writing, seem to model a way of seeing or organizing experience so it can break out again in the poems. (27)

In the section that follows, there is an outline for a way to introduce the idea of writing a poem about an artwork to students by using one artwork and one poem as an example. As Hollman did with her students, this outline begins with an intense period of looking at the painting.

**The Painting**

We don’t know what processes Jane Flanders went through to write her poem about the painting, but we can imagine them if we work closely with both painting and poem. This opening exercise of looking and reading will help you create your own ekphrasis of a Van Gogh Painting.

Some of us may have been lucky enough to have seen Van Gogh’s work exhibited in a museum or seen the touring exhibition “Van Gogh Alive” when it came to New Zealand in 2021. Many art books and books about Van Gogh also contain reproductions of Van Gogh’s work that enable us to see the painting *Bedroom in Arles*. In addition, both the website of the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam and the site *Google Arts and Culture* allow us to look closely at Van Gogh’s bed.

**The Van Gogh Museum**

<https://www.vangoghmuseum.nl/en/collection/s0047V1962>

shows us a version of the painting and then gives us more detail about the colours Van Gogh used. It enables us to see how the colours have changed over time. For instance, Van Gogh describes the walls as being lilac, but now they appear to be pale blue.

<https://ontrafel.vangogh.nl/en/story/37/the-colour-has-to-do-the-job-here/>

When the painting was damaged by damp, Van Gogh made a copy which was very slightly different from the first:

<https://ontrafel.vangogh.nl/en/story/40/after-the-flood/>

Using this link, you can zoom in on the painting to such a degree that you can see Van Gogh’s brush strokes. It is as if you are standing in front of the painting and leaning in.

The site *Google Arts and Culture* has more than one version of the painting for us to see.

<https://artsandculture.google.com/story/MAVBEVzvKv8cgw>

enables us to zoom in on parts of the painting.

<https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/the-bedroom-vincent-van-gogh/KwF-AdF1REQl6w>

contains a link that enables us to read the letter Van Gogh wrote to his brother Theo describing the painting. The letter is archived in the Van Gogh Museum:

<https://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let705/letter.html>

**First:**

Find out enough about Vincent Van Gogh to write a short biography. You could illustrate it with his paintings.

**Spend time getting to know the painting.**

Make a list of everything you can see.

What is on the small dressing table?

What is hanging beside the door?

What is hanging on the pegs behind the bed?

What pictures are hanging on the walls?

Can you see anything out the window?

List the colours you can see.

**Once you know what is in the room, go a bit deeper.**

Think about the colours. They were important to Van Gogh. How do they make you feel?

This is what he wrote in the letter to his brother:

This time it’s simply my bedroom, but the colour has to do the job here, and through its being simplified by giving a grander style to things, to be suggestive here *of rest* or *of sleep* in general. In short, looking at the painting should *rest* the mind, or rather, the imagination.

The walls are of a pale violet. The floor—is of red tiles.

The bedstead and the chairs are fresh butter yellow.

The sheet and the pillows very bright lemon green.

The blanket scarlet red.

The window green.

The dressing table orange, the basin blue.

The doors lilac.

And that’s all—nothing in this bedroom, with its shutters closed.

The solidity of the furniture should also now express unshakeable repose.

**Source**: <https://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let705/letter.html>

What would it feel like to have these colours in your own bedroom?

What would the floor feel like under your feet?

What would the bed feel like if you lay down on it?

Is the room cool or warm?

**Now, go deeper still.**

Zoom in and look at the brush strokes.

Can you see how Van Gogh painted?

Imagine putting the paint on the canvas. Have you ever used oil paints yourself? What would it smell and feel like?

Find out how big the painting is. Measure it out and imagine it in front of you on an easel or on your wall.

Copy it using the brightest colours you can find.

Close the art book or turn off the laptop and sketch it from memory. Which parts did you forget about? Which parts of the painting seemed most important and were easiest to remember?

If you were going to write about this painting, what part would you choose to write about?

**SUGGESTION**: write a poem about the painting addressed to Van Gogh

**The Poem**

“Van Gogh’s Bed”

Jane Flanders.

Some poems about paintings describe the scene depicted in the painting. Other poems imagine the artist speaking to the poet or the poet speaking to the artist. Sometimes, a character in the painting speaks. The poet might relate the subject of the painting to something else in their own lives. The poet might be trying to work out what the painting is about or how it relates to the artist’s life. Whichever way the poet chooses to respond to a painting, you can be sure that they have spent a long time looking first.

Jane Flanders doesn’t tell her readers to go off and find Van Gogh’s painting of his bedroom, but her title tells us what painting to look for if we do want to see it.

She wants us to think about his bed and what that bed in that room might have meant to Van Gogh.

NB: Flanders says the bed is orange even though Van Gogh called it butter yellow. The colour has changed in the hundred years since he painted it. You can find information about the colours on the Van Gogh Museum website.

Notice how each four-lined stanza begins with a description of something to do with the bed.

It is orange

It is narrow

It is clumsy

It is empty

Look carefully at each stanza and think about what Flanders noticed about the painting that she wanted her readers to visualize.

What is Flanders telling us about Van Gogh, his imagination, his artwork, his hopes for the future?

How does the form of the poem contribute to your understanding of it?

**SUGGESTION:**

Write a version of Jane Flander’s poem about your own bed.

NB: When you write a poem inspired by someone else’s work, you always acknowledge the original. So you would call your poem “Ella’s Bed” or “Luke’s Bed” and write “after Van Gogh’s Bed by Jane Flanders” underneath the title.

Similarly, when poets write ekphrasis they find a way to let their readers know which artwork has inspired them. Sometimes, they might write “after ‘Bedroom in Arles’ by Vincent Van Gogh.” Poets might also use the same title as the artist had, or they might include the artist’s name and some detail of the painting in their poem. Readers of ekphrasis want to know what artworks the poet was inspired by.

**Works Cited:**

Hollman, Marilyn J. “From Art to Poetry: ‘Prance as They Dance’”. *The English Journal*, Mar., 1989. Vol.78, No. 3 (Mar., 1989), National Council of Teachers of English

pp. 24-27. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/819442>

**Additional Material**

Moorman, Honor. “Backing into Ekphrasis: Reading and Writing Poetry about Visual Art.” *The English Journal*, Sep., 2006, Vol.96, No 1 (Sep., 2006) National Council of Teachers of English, pp. 46-53. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30046662>

(for suggestions for further relevant texts (American))