

MSO

CLASSROOM

WRITING ABOUT ART

EXPANDED EKPHRASIS

Ekphrasis, from the Greek meaning ‘description’, is used to refer to the verbal representation of visual representation. More frequently, it refers to the written description of a work of art (either real or imagined), and it commonly takes the form of poetry. In Book 18 of Homer’s *Iliad*, the description of Achilles’ shield – which is adorned with intricate imagery and scenes – is one of the first known examples of ekphrastic poetry. Two additional well-known ekphrastic poems are John Keats’ *Ode on a Grecian Urn* and Robert Browning’s *My Last Duchess*. With these examples, we do not have access to the artwork that inspired the poetry, nor is it confirmed whether or not the artwork in question was real or imagined. In any case, each poem uses the artwork as a way to address broader ideas – for example, Keats uses the urn to ponder the nature of art, while Browning’s poem considers the power that men have continued to wield over women.

Many 20th and 21st century ekphrastic poems refer us, either through title, note or within the poem, to the real-world artwork or works that inspired the poem, as in the following examples, which address painting, collage or sculpture:

- W. H. Auden *Musée des Beaux Arts*
- Wislawa Szymborska *Two Monkeys by Bruegel*
- W. D. Snodgrass *Matisse: “The Red Studio”*
- Anne Sexton *The Starry Night*
- Joseph Stanton *Edward Hopper’s New York Movie*
- Lisa Gorton *The Triumphs of Caesar or Dreams and Artefacts*
- Evelyn Araluen *The Bride or Marcel Duchamp with Pocket Chess Set*
- Belinda Rule *Ekphrasis*
- Beatrix Liv Delcarmen *Ekphrasis at the Foot of Kara Walker’s Fountain*

But one can find many examples of ekphrasis in contemporary publications and literary journals. For example, a 2017 issue of online Australian poetry journal *Cordite* was dedicated to ekphrastic poetry.

TASK 1

Pick one example from the above list of ekphrastic poems. You can find all of the above online. You may also like to look up the artwork on which it is based. Write a short paragraph about the poem, answering the following questions:

- How does the poet address the artwork? For example, is the poem descriptive? Does the poet provide a clear impression of the artwork? Or, is that work referred to more obliquely?
- What do we find out about the speaker, in the way that they describe or refer to the artwork? What do they want the reader to ‘see’ in the artwork?
- What devices does the poet employ (e.g. metaphor, repetition, alliteration, rhyme, anaphora, visual effects, a specific use of line breaks) and to what effect?
- Is the poem just ‘about’ the artwork, or does it direct us towards a broader meaning?

TASK 2

Some artworks have inspired numerous poets. For example, Bruegel’s *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* not only inspired Auden, but also William Carlos Williams (‘Landscape with the Fall of Icarus’). Consulting the visual artwork that inspired the poem you wrote about in Task 1, write a short, free verse poem of your own that responds to that artwork. As you write your poem, think about the impression that you want to leave with the reader.

TASK 3

Ekphrastic poems have also been inspired by other art forms, such as dance, film and music, as in the following, all of which can be found online:

- Jarad Bruinstroop *Pas de Deux for Silhouette and Swan*
- Jessica Wilkinson *Swan Lake, Liebeslieder Waltzer or Quixotic*
- May Swenson *The James Bond Movie*
- Luke Beesley *The Master*
- Geoff Page *The Cello Sonatas of J.S. Bach*

For this task, you are going to write an ekphrastic poem (short or long) that is inspired by the modern dance performance *Appalachian Spring*, choreographed by Martha Graham with music by Aaron Copland and sets by Isamu Noguchi. (You can find the 1959 version, featuring Martha Graham as the Bride, on YouTube). You may like to watch the entire performance, or to focus on just one section/movement of the dance.

Take a blank piece of paper and draw a line down the middle (making two columns).

On the left, describe aspects of the performance: the dancers' movements; the varying moods, tempos and rhythms of the music; the dancers' relationships with, and use of, sets and props; how music and dance interact; the costumes, and more.

On the right, jot down some notes on what the performance evokes for you. Consider: How does the story frame an aspect of American colonial history? What does the performance make you think or feel? What are your emotional responses? What themes does the performance address? What does it make you think about history, colonisation, Australian colonial contexts, personal relationships, and so on?

As you craft your poem, interweave descriptive aspects from the left-hand column with the thoughts and themes from the right-hand column. You may write one line at a time, drawing material from alternating columns. Or, you could take a looser approach. When you have a draft poem, reflect on the broader meaning that emerges from your lines, and on how this performance led you to that broader meaning.

BIOS



NICHOLAS BOCHNER

After training in Adelaide and London, Nicholas spent 3 years as Artist-in-Residence at the University of Queensland as part of the ensemble *Perihelion*, forging a strong reputation as an exponent of contemporary music. He joined the MSO as Assistant Principal Cello in 1998. Since then he has appeared as a soloist, chamber musician and recitalist. He has also taught cello and improvisation at the Australian National Academy of Music (ANAM).

Nicholas has always had a strong commitment to music education and community engagement. In 2010 he was awarded the Dame Roma Mitchell Churchill Fellowship to study the LSO's iconic Discovery program and the use of improvisation in training classical musicians at the Guildhall School of Music.

In 2016, Nicholas' considerable experience as an orchestral musician and his passion for communication led him to undertake a fellowship at ANAM where he developed, conducted and presented educational concerts for primary school children. During the fellowship he was mentored by Paul Rissmann, Graham Abbott and the legendary Richard Gill AO. Since then he has presented educational concerts for children and adults for MSO, ANAM and the Melbourne Chamber Orchestra.

In 2020 he was named the MSO's Cybec Assistant Conductor for Learning and Engagement. He is also the conductor of the Melbourne University Biomedical Students' Orchestra. In support of his work as an education presenter, Nicholas has been studying conducting with Benjamin Northey and won a coveted place at the TSO's 2019 Australian Conducting Academy.



JESSICA L. WILKINSON

Jessica L. Wilkinson has published three poetic biographies, *Marionette: A Biography of Miss Marion Davies* (Vagabond 2012), *Suite for Percy Grainger* (Vagabond 2014) and *Music Made Visible: A Biography of George Balanchine* (Vagabond, 2019). In collaboration with composer Simon Charles, Marionette was developed into a performance work of voice, music and sound; they released an album in 2018. Jessica is the founding editor of *Rabbit: a journal for nonfiction poetry* and the offshoot *Rabbit Poets Series* of single-author collections by emerging Australian poets. She co-edited the anthology *Contemporary Australian Feminist Poetry* (Hunter Publishers, 2016), and is an Associate Professor in Creative Writing in the School of Media and Communication at RMIT University, Melbourne.



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