

## Mapping Rome

### Ekphrasis, Explained

*Ekphrasis* refers to a verbal description of the visual. Whether oral or written, *ekphrases* are crafted such that the thing being described “comes to life” before the listeners’ or readers’ eyes, even though they have not gazed upon that thing. This was a standard exercise for ancient students of rhetoric, who were asked to choose words to paint a mental picture for their audiences. It was said that a successful exercise would have the desired effect of enlivening the featured object, animating it within the listeners’ or readers’ imaginations.

A classic literary example is provided by Homer, whose famed account of Achilles’ Shield moves out from its center, decorated with the earth and sky, ringed by constellations, to then describe concentric circles of human activity, such as herding and harvesting, all encompassed by the ocean.<sup>1</sup> In Late Antiquity, *ekphrasis* became a favored technique for Christian authors for describing the tombs of saints.<sup>2</sup> In the modern period, Romantic poets revived the genre as they contemplated great works of art.<sup>3</sup>

Let me provide you with an example that I penned myself. Read it through once, wait at least ten minutes, and then read the *ekphrasis* again before looking at the image, which can be found at:

<<http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/42969>>

The night air is blue and thick  
and smudged with mystery.  
The village sleeps under a hazy blanket of the past  
while the goat-headed boy  
peers into the blank space of his future.  
Perched on the edge of his chair,  
the reader gazes into his book,  
bright with unwritten light.  
She stands over him, the holy parchment of her wings  
spreading like a paper-cutout moth,  
drawn to the light from the open book.

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<sup>1</sup> *Iliad*, Book 18, lines 478-609.

<sup>2</sup> On this topic, see Patricia Cox Miller’s [The Corporeal Imagination: Signifying the Holy in Late Antique Christianity](#) (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> You may have read Percy Shelley’s “On the Medusa of Leonardo Da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery,” or John Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn.”

The faint trace of a smile  
 dabs her lips, while her eyes  
 dilate with dream,  
 that potent fraction of prophecy.  
 Her hands grasp a long bar,  
 as if she has dismounted a trapeze;  
 the circus costume is snug on her tapered torso  
 as she lands gracefully by the reader.  
 Red blouse in the slumbering blue:  
 his widened eye sits at the level of her sex.  
 Her arms extend in a gesture of giving,  
 while the behatted breath  
 of Spirit descends  
 to whisper foreign messages:  
 tales of exile and sorrow and the longing for home.  
 She repeats them patiently,  
 syllable by syllable,  
 soft assonance and harsh gutturals;  
 and as he listens intently  
 to the voice wrapped in blue night,  
 the goat-face of the reader  
     reddens,  
         blushing  
             with unbidden  
                 knowledge.

What I did here was set out to describe the setting and the figures. I also thought about color and composition, as well as the dream-like atmosphere of Chagall's painting.<sup>4</sup> I recalled the teaching from the Talmud that, "Sleep is one sixtieth of death, and dream is one sixtieth of prophecy,"<sup>5</sup> and decided to play with some religious ideas about angels and revelations. So as I worked on translating the visual into a verbal form, I ended up inventing a snippet of story not only to animate the scene, but to enliven this *ekphrasis* with some personal investment.

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<sup>4</sup> Marc Chagall, "The Angel and the Reader." Gouache with encaustic and oil paint on cream wove paper, 636 x 488 mm, c. 1930. Olivia Shaler Swan Memorial Collection, The Art Institute of Chicago.

<sup>5</sup> Berakhot 57a.

### Ekphrasis: Instructions.

*(250 words minimum.)*

Pick one (1) image or object currently on display at the Tang museum. Do not choose something abstract, or an audio or video installation. The object about which you write must be representational enough so that your writing can be sufficiently descriptive.

While your finished work is a writing exercise, it starts as an exercise in looking. You will have to look slowly and carefully (rinse, repeat) at your subject, so that seeing becomes less passive and actively engages the mind: How is this thing constructed? Where do the eyes begin, move, or rest? What does it communicate to viewers?

Now translate your observations into words. Narrate, rather than name. This means using verbs to describe what the object does, and not just nouns to label it. Instead of flatly telling your reader what, instruct your reader how she would see this thing if she were in its presence. Move systematically up or down, across the image or around the object, and trace that form with words.

Be playful; be beguiling. Choose words that evoke, that enchant. Can someone who has not gone to the Tang read your description and then visualize this piece in her mind's eye?

Write out a draft, and then edit it over the course of one week. Rewrite your pieces, polishing your ekphrasis until it shines like a literary gem.

At the end of your assignment, put the location and date of your ekphrasis in parentheses, as well as the name of the artist, the title of the work, and the year it was created (if known).

— Dr. Spinner