

POETRY ON VISUAL ART

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"You know, Phaedrus that is the strange thing about writing, which makes it truly correspond to painting. The painter's products stand before us as though they were alive, but if you question them, they maintain a most majestic silence. It is the same with written words; they seem to talk to you as if they were intelligent, but if you ask them anything about what they say, from a desire to be instructed, they go on telling you just the same thing forever"

(From: Plato's *Phaedrus* 275 d)

The affinity between a literary work and a visual art has long been a favourite issue for academic discourse among scholars, critics and philosophers alike. Both a work of literature and a visual art, being the powerful modes of human expression, represent biased or unbiased perception of their creators. No matter which form of expression they are, creativity and innovation are the underlying ingredients of any artistic output. A writer always intends to play a game of selection and combination with the words and texts while an artist puts effort to display figures and patterns with colours and shapes. The end purpose of the both creators is to create an 'image' in the mind and sight of their respective audience and readers. The same is true in matters of poetry and art. For centuries, art has inspired poets and poetry has inspired artists. Leonardo da Vinci rightly puts it when he says, "Painting is poetry

that is seen rather than felt, and poetry is painting that is felt rather than seen." Many poetic works have been composed with inspiration of paintings and sculptures confirming the fact that poetry and visual art can create a powerful combination. This has given a birth to the genre called 'Ekphrastic Poetry.' The word Ekphrasis comes from the Greek language meaning description. It was applied to the skill of describing a thing with vivid detail. Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms defines Ekphrasis as "a verbal description of non-verbal work of art, real or imagined, usually a painting or sculpture." In such poems the poet ventures to amplify and expand the meaning of a painting or sculpture, through the imaginative act of narrating and reflecting the visual art. Alfred Corn in his essay on the history of ekphrastic verse writes, "once the ambition of producing a complete and accurate description is put aside, a poem can provide a new aspects for a work of visual art." This article intends to take a look on some of the representative ekphrastic poems from different literary era through this light.

One of the earliest examples of ekphrastic verse can be discovered in Homer's *Illiad* where we can find an elaborate description of decorated shield of Achilles fashioned by Hephaestus, the Greek god of blacksmiths, craftsmen, artisans, and sculptors. The shield depicted images

of the earth, sky, sea, sun, moon, and stars, pictures of two cities, a wedding celebration, a murder trial, an advancing army, domestic and wild beasts, a war, a field full of plowmen, a vineyard, a meadow, and dancing boys and girls.

*And first Hephaestus makes a great and massive shield,
blazoning well wrought emblems all
across its surface,*

... ..

*And he forged on the shield two noble cities filled
with mortal men, with weddings and
wedding feast in one*

... ..

*And he forged the Ocean River's mighty
power girdling
round the outmost rim of the welded
indestructible shield.*

(The Illiad, Book 18, lines 558-707)

Inspired by the same work, later W.H. Auden wrote The Shield of Achilles in 1952. However, in Auden's work we find Hephaestus's grand images replaced by apocalyptic ones: barbed wire and bare fields, rape and murder, bureaucrats and sentries.



A decorated shield of Achilles

*She looked over his shoulder For vines
and olive trees,*

*Marble well-governed cities
And ships upon untamed seas,
But there on the shining metal
His hands had put instead
An artificial wilderness
And a sky like lead.*

... ..

*Barbed wire enclosed an arbitrary spot
Where bored officials lounged (one
cracked a joke)
And sentries sweated for the day was hot:
A crowd of ordinary decent folk
Watched from without and neither moved
nor spoke As three pale figures were led
forth and bound To three posts driven
upright in the ground.*

(The Shield of Achilles, lines 1-8 and 31-37)

John Keats's Ode to Grecian Urn is yet another celebrated poem in this genre. The poem offers a vivid description of a pottery from ancient Greek civilization and contemplates on the timelessness of art:

*Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness,
Thou foster-child of silence and slow time,
Sylvan historian, who canst thus express
A flowery tale more sweetly than our
rhyme: What leaf-fring'd legend haunts
about thy shape
Of deities or mortals, or of both,
In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?
What men or gods are these? What
maidens loth?*

*What mad pursuit? What struggle to
escape? What pipes and timbrels? What
wild ecstasy?*

... ..

*When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou
say'st, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty, –
that is all Ye know on earth, and all ye
need to know."*



A sketch of Grecian urn by Keats

(Ode to Grecian Urn, lines 1-9 and 46- 50)

One of the groundbreaking poems of ekphrastic genre is the American poet Edwin Markham's *The Man with the Hoe*, published in 1899. The poem, based on the painting of the French artist Jean - Francois Millet, triggered a national debate on labour rights in the USA. It portrays a labourer leaning upon his hoe, overburdened by his work. The image of the man with hoe became a symbol of the agricultural labours and raised a question on societal role in the working condition of farm workers. The poem goes on:

*Bowed by the weight of centuries he leans
Upon his hoe and gazes on the ground,
The emptiness of ages in his face,
And on his back the burden of the world.
Who made him dead to rapture and
despair,*

*A thing that grieves not and that never
hopes.
Stolid and stunned, a brother to the ox?
Who loosened and let down this brutal
jaw?
Whose was the hand that slanted back this
brow?
Whose breath blew out the light within
this brain?*

Both the poem and the painting are perhaps the best testimony of the powerful impact that art and verse can leave in the society. Interestingly, a single work of visual art that offered a creative stimulation to two different poets is a 1558 painting by a Dutch artist Pieter Brueghel. His masterpiece *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* is the painting on which W. H. Auden's *Musée des Beaux Arts* and William Carlos Williams' *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* are based. Both the poems revolve around the old master's depiction of the tragic Greek myth of Icarus who flew too close to the sun with wax wings and fell into the sea to his death.

The painting focuses more on the landscape rather than the portrayal of Icarus' fall. The men in this picture are working; one ploughing his fields, one tending his flock, and the other man is most likely fishing. In the painting they do not look bothered by anything going on around them, and are especially not paying any particular attention to Icarus. It seems that the workers give Icarus no attention as if Icarus' drowning is unimportant in the world.

Auden's poem *Musée des Beaux Arts*, first published in 1939, opens up with a "miraculous birth", and ends with "the tragedy" of a death. Auden



Jean-François Millet. *The Man with the Hoe*, 1860-1862. Oil on canvas, 81.9 x 100.3 cm

praises the painters, like Brueghel, who understood the nature of suffering and humanity's indifference to it. The theme in the poem is apathy of the world to human suffering:

*In Brueghel's Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
Water, and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,*

Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

(Musée des Beaux Arts, line 14-21)

Later in 1960, William Carlos Williams also narrates the same story about the fall of Icarus with many contextual details. In his poem with the same title as Brueghel's masterpiece, Williams expresses his wonder on how an individual's pain and tragedy go unnoticed sometimes. In the very outset of the poem, he creates a vivid image of the surrounding landscape. The death of Icarus took place in spring when the year was emerging in all its pageantry. Everywhere in the surrounding there was a thrill of spring. A farmer was tilling his land



Peter Bruegel the Elder. *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, c. 1554-55. Oil on panel. 74 x 112 cm.

and seashore was full of activity. Meanwhile, the heat of the sun made the wax wings of Icarus melt. Icarus fell into the sea with a splash. No one noticed Icarus drowning in the sea. The ploughman goes on ploughing and the ship keeps on sailing. The event passed 'unsignificantly' and 'unnoticed.' The world which Icarus falls to is so "concerned with itself" that it feels indifferent about his tragedy:

*According to Brueghel
when Icarus fell
it was spring*

*a farmer was ploughing
his field
the whole pageantry*

*of the year was
awake tingling
near*

*the edge of the sea
concerned
with itself*

*sweating in the sun
that melted
the wings' wax*

*unsignificantly
off the coast
there was*

*a splash quite unnoticed
this was
Icarus drowning*

(*Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*,
lines 1- 21)

The twentieth century confessional poet Anne Sexton and the nineteenth century Dutch painter Vincent van Gogh had many things in common. Both of them struggled with mental

breakdown and ultimately committed suicide to end their life. The *Starry Night* was the masterpiece that Van Gogh actually painted while he was at an asylum in 1889, thirteen months before his death. The painting depicts the enchanting night sky in blues and blacks brimming with whirling clouds, bright yellow- white stars and bright crescent moon against a silent village below. A cypress trees seems to connect earth and sky in the foreground. Taking the inspiration from this great work, Anne Sexton composed a poem on the same title in 1961. The poem reflects a sense of isolation and hostility amidst the movement of stars. To Sexton, the central moon image in the painting appears as a great dragon that will suck up into its being. The dark tree

at the foreground is described as “black haired” who “slips/ up like a drowned woman into the hot sky.” She repeatedly says, “This is how/ I want to die.” Clearly, Sexton sees the reflection of her own death wish in the Van Gogh’s painting:

*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 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:*



Vincent van Gogh. *Starry Night*, Oil on canvas.

*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.*

(The Starry Night, lines 1- 18)

Thus, this brief study on some of the representative poems on ekphrastic genre makes it clear that the pairing of visual art and literary art leaves a perennial impression on the both viewers and readers' mind. Poetry and art often consist of multiple layers of meanings and interpretations. Just as the artwork gives a new dimension to the poetry, the poem too gives a new dimension to the art work. Jan Greenberg, the author of *Heart to Heart; New Poems Inspired by Twentieth century American Art* reaffirms the 'power of art to inspire language' and says, "what the poet sees in art and puts into words can transform an imageextending what is often an immediate response into something more lasting and reflecting." After all, as Plutarch has said, "Painting is silent poetry and poetry is painting that speaks".

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