Ekphrasis

One particular kind of visual description is also the oldest type of writing about art in the West. Called ekphrasis, it was created by the Greeks. The goal of this literary form is to make the reader envision the thing described as if it were physically present. In many cases, however, the subject never actually existed, making the ekphrastic description a demonstration of both the creative imagination and the skill of the writer. For most readers of famous Greek and Latin texts, it did not matter whether the subject was actual or imagined. The texts were studied to form habits of thinking and writing, not as art historical evidence.9

Homer’s description of Achilles’ shield in Book 18 of the Iliad stands at the beginning of the ekphrastic tradition. Two things about it became central to the genre. First, the passage implicitly compares visual and verbal means of description, most dramatically by weaving elements that could not be part of a shield (like movement and sound) with things that could be (like physical material and visual details). This emphasizes the possibilities of the verbal and the limitations of the visual. Second, the thing being described comes to seem real in the imagination of the reader, despite the fact that it could not exist.

Many writers in subsequent centuries followed Homer’s lead and wrote ekphrastic descriptions. During the Italian Renaissance, the rhetorical form became an important literary genre and, in a surprising twist, artists made visual works based on written descriptions of art that had never existed.10 A famous 19th-century example of ekphrastic poetry is John Keats’s "Ode on a Grecian Urn," written in 1819. Like Homer, Keats mixed descriptions of things that could have been visible on a Greek vase with things that could not have been. Unlike Homer, Keats made himself and his own experience of viewing the vase an important part of the poem. This shift in emphasis reflects a transformation in the genre of ekphrasis, which increasingly came to include the reaction of a particular viewer as part of the description of an object.11

In the second half of the 18th century, ekphrastic writing suddenly appeared in a new context. Travelers and would-be travelers provided a growing public eager for vivid descriptions of works of art. Without any way of publishing accurate reproductions, appearances had to be conveyed through words alone. William Hazlitt, John Ruskin, and Walter Pater, to name three great 19th-century writers in English, published grand set-pieces of ekphrasis about older as well as contemporary art. For them, the fact that the object existed mattered a great deal. The goal of these Victorian writers was to make the reader feel like a participant in the visual experience. The more convincingly this was done, the more effective the writing was judged to be.

John Ruskin (1819-1900) was the most influential Victorian writer about art, famous for his impassioned defense of the painter J.M.W. Turner and his brilliant ekphrastic passages. In one of them, published in Modern Painters in 1843, he described Turner’s Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying – Typhoon Coming On, also known as The Slave Ship (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston). Like Homer and Keats, Ruskin mixed specific visual details of the picture with allusions to movement and sound in his description of what the painting looked like. Unlike them, his goal was to persuade readers to believe in his imaginative understanding of an actual work of art.
It is a sunset on the Atlantic after prolonged storm; but the storm is partially lulled, and the torn and streaming rain clouds are moving in scarlet lines to lose themselves in the hollow of the night. The whole surface of the sea included in the picture is divided into two ridges of enormous swell, not high, nor local, but a low, broad heaving of the whole ocean, like the lifting of its bosom by deep-drawn breath after the torture of the storm. Between these two ridges, the fire of the sunset falls along the trough of the sea, dyeing it with an awful but glorious light, the intense and lurid splendour which burns like gold and bathes like blood. Along this fiery path and valley, the tossing waves by which the swell of the sea is restlessly divided, lift themselves in dark, indefinite, fantastic forms, each casting a faint and ghastly shadow behind it along the illumined foam. They do not rise everywhere, but three or four together in wild groups, fitfully and furiously, as the under strength of the swell compels or permits them; leaving between them treacherous spaces of level and whirling water, now lighted with green and lamp-like fire, now flashing back the gold of the declining sun, now fearfully dyed from above with the indistinguishable images of the burning clouds, which fall upon them in flakes of crimson and scarlet, and give to the reckless waves the added motion of their own fiery flying. Purple and blue, the lurid shadows of the hollow breakers are cast upon the mist of the night, which gathers cold and low, advancing like the shadow of death upon the guilty* ship as it labors amidst the lightning of the sea, its thin masts written upon the sky in lines of blood, girded with condemnation in that fearful hue which signs the sky with horror, and mixes its flaming flood with the sunlight, – and cast far along the desolate heave of the sepulchral waves, incarnadines the multitudinous sea.

[Ruskin’s note]*She is a slaver, throwing her slaves overboard. The near sea is encumbered with corpses.12

Ruskin’s description is overwhelming. The weather, the light, the movement of the sea, the ship seen against the sky, are made vivid by his rich use of adjectives. Ruskin drew upon an immense vocabulary, using many words that are unfamiliar today. Even his Victorian contemporaries regarded his style of writing as exceptional. It shows the influence of the King James translation of the Bible and, in this particular passage, Shakespeare. These are references that Ruskin assumed his audience would understand, although any modern reader needs a dictionary and specialized knowledge to follow them.13

It is hard to imagine that anything important has been left out of Ruskin’s description. A review of the painting when it was exhibited in London in 1840, however, written by the novelist William Thackeray, makes it clear how much Ruskin ignored:

The slaver throwing its cargo overboard is the most tremendous piece of colour that ever was seen; it sets the corner of the room in which it hangs into flame. . . . Rocks of gamboge are marked down upon the canvas; flakes of white laid on with a trowel; bladders of vermilion madly spirited here and there. Yonder is the slaver rocking in the midst of a flashing foam of white-lead. The sun glares down upon a horrible sea of emerald and purple, into which chocolate-coloured slaves are plunged, and chains that will not sink; and round these are floundering such a race of fishes as never was seen since the saeculum Pyrrhae; gasping dolphins redder than the reddest herrings; horrid spreading polypi, like huge, slimy, poached eggs, in which hapless [black slaves] plunge and disappear. Ye gods, what a ‘middle passage’!14
Thackeray’s account is as vivid and detailed as Ruskin’s, but sarcastic in the style of some art criticism of the period. The excesses of the language are not only entertaining, but they convey something of what certainly appeared to many like the excesses of Turner’s painting. “The sun glares down upon the horrible sea of emerald and purple,” for example, suggests how extraordinary the colors seemed. "Flakes of white laid on with a trowel" combines information about color and surface with a sense of making. In fact, although Ruskin did not mention it, Turner’s handling of paint and the colors he used are dramatic, remarkable aspects of the work. Mention of the "Middle Passage," a reference to the Atlantic slave trade, directly relates Turner's picture to a contentious political issue of the time. Ruskin, by contrast, only included a note with the information that the picture showed a slave ship. In these respects, Thackeray's review is more informative than Ruskin's, even if it lacks the extraordinary imaginative reach and literary ambition of the set-piece from *Modern Painters*.

Modern writers about art have neither the number of readers nor the amount of space that Ruskin and Thackeray could assume. Furthermore, the ability to reproduce works of art in sumptuous color plates has reduced the importance of ekphrastic writing. Coffee-table art books, however, have provided a new venue. The writer need not create an image of the work for the viewer because superb illustrations are the point of the publication. Nonetheless, the best writers use the text to guide the reader through the works being discussed and, in the process, they interpret them with their emphases and choice of words. A long passage by Robert Rosenblum (1927-2006) about J.A.D. Ingres’s *Madame Moitessier* (National Gallery, London), for example, suggests the visual richness of Ingres’s picture with the detail and complexity of the prose while leading us through the composition.

At first, the dense luxury of Second Empire costume and décor dazzles the eye, above all in the cornucopian outburst of printed roses that spills across the silk dress, and then in the compounding of this splendor through the tufted damask of the sofa, the amethyst bracelet, the glimpse of a fan and oriental vase on the Rococo console, the gilded ornament of the mirror frame. Yet ultimately this *nouveau riche* opulence is subordinated to a strange silence and calm that completely contradict the portrait’s initial assault upon our senses of sight and touch. For one, the mirror image that occupies the upper half of the painting provides a dull and hazy reflection that challenges the vivid clarity of the material world below . . .

Yet this dialogue between a real world and its dreamlike, immaterial reflection is not merely visual; it also involves the personality of the sitter . . . A pampered creature of flesh as plump and cushioned as the sofa beneath her, she nevertheless becomes an enigmatic presence . . . a modern oracle presiding in the padded comfort of a mid-nineteenth-century drawing room. Her right hand, as pliable as a starfish, is posed weightlessly against her cheek and temple, as if enforcing her uncommon powers of wisdom and concentration; and her eyes, compressed forward with the total volume of the head, appear to observe us both directly and obliquely. And to enrich even more this aura of a tangible yet remote being, Ingres has cast her reflection in pure profile, a ghostly sibyl who gazes as sightlessly as a marble statue into an invisible world. 15

Rosenblum’s description is long and complicated. Like the painting itself, this passage demands slow, careful attention to many details. Even with a reproduction of the picture next to it, the text contains so many particulars about costume, setting, and sitter that it takes time to absorb.
Only at the end is there an interpretation of the “personality of the sitter,” based on visual elements that fit into what the reader already knows. “A pampered creature” makes sense because of the details in the previous paragraph, while the idea of “a tangible yet remote being” has been suggested already in the discussion of the “dull and hazy reflection that challenges the vivid clarity of the material world below.”

Rosenblum wrote another description of the same painting, this one included in a history of 19th-century art. The differences between them are revealing. Instead of forming an image of the work in the mind of the reader, the goal of any ekphrastic passage, this text relates the picture to other works made during the same historical time. The author highlights those aspects of the painting that suit his historical argument as well as his characterization of the artist's style. In addition, the identity of the sitter, part of the history of the work as well as the period, plays an active role in the analysis.

Viewed through the lenses of period style, Ingres's portrait... make[s] us wallow in a plum-pudding richness of textures, materials, patterns that aspire to an airless density. Mme. Moitessier, of course, is a model of cool propriety in her wealthy Paris interior, and her posture alludes to classical prototypes; but she and Ingres clearly revel in her sumptuous inventory of possessions: the gilt console, the tufted damask sofa, the Chinese vase, the peacock-feathered fan, the bracelets and brooch with their enormous gems, and above all the full cascade of the rose-patterned silk dress with its embellishments of fringes and ribbons. But Ingres... transcends the Second Empire period look through his own genius, which here ennobles the sitter not only with the abstract, yet sensual linear circuits that command the undulant shapes of fingers, shoulders, and arms, but through an adaptation of the common antique pose of contemplative head-on-hand...16

Like the passages quoted above, these two descriptions by Rosenblum depend upon the experience of many years spent looking and writing. Rich in language and disciplined in structure, they build sentence by sentence on what came before. The reader is not allowed to wander off the direction the author has set and is not left in doubt about what is being discussed. The details also build upon one another, so the relationships among them are made clear. All of these examples demonstrate what the best art historical writing can achieve.

References:
10. One such painting, Sandro Botticelli’s Calumny of Apelles (Uffizi, Florence), is discussed and illustrated in Webb, “Ekphrasis,” Section 4.