

Ekphrastic Poetry

Ekphrastic poetry has come to be defined as poems written about works of art; however, in ancient Greece, the term *ekphrasis* was applied to the skill of describing a thing with vivid detail. One of the earliest examples of ekphrasis can be found in Homer's **epic poem** *The Iliad*, in which the speaker elaborately describes the shield of Achilles in nearly 150 poetic lines:

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 feasts in one
...
And he forged the Ocean River's mighty power girdling
round the outmost rim of the welded indestructible shield.
(The Iliad, Book 18, lines 558–707)

In addition to the descriptions of a work of art, an ekphrastic poem usually includes an exploration of how the speaker is impacted by his or her experience with the work. For example, in [John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn,"](#) the ancient vessel piques the curiosity of the speaker, who asks: "What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?"

Poetic Responses to Art



[Zoom in](#)

Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot's *Landscape with Lake and Boatman* resonated with Romantic critics and poets, who often wrote about

It is not uncommon for writers to have transformative experiences with works of art. The poet Rainer Maria Rilke was greatly influenced by visual art, including the paintings of the French artist Paul Cezanne, whose work, he believed, helped his writing. Rilke captures the transformative experience of viewing a work of art in his poem "[Archaic Torso of Apollo.](#)" In the poem, the speaker's observations about an ancient sculpture spark reflections about existence. The poem ends with a statement of epiphany: "You must change your life."

Of course, not all reactions to works of art are so life altering. Paintings like Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot's *Landscape with Lake and Boatman* could inspire poems about beautiful scenes. The dramatic coloring of a quiet vista at sunset appealed to the critics of Corot's time.

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One critic, Théophile Gautier, enthusiastically described the painting in a poem:

See now how evening from the mount descends;
The shadow darker grows, and wider too;
The sky wears citrus tones on greenish hue;
...
Scarcely enough daylight remains to see
Your name, Corot, so modestly inscribed.

The Power of Ekphrasis

The publication of an ekphrastic poem in the 19th century sparked a national debate. Inspired by the French artist Jean-François Millet's painting *Man with a Hoe*, the [American poet Edwin Markham wrote a poem](#) about the backbreaking work of laborers as represented by the weary man depicted in Millet's painting. After the poem was published in the *San Francisco Examiner* in 1899, it was reprinted in thousands of newspapers and magazines across the country. As a result of the poem, debate about labor rights occupied the press, social circles, and classrooms. The symbol of the man with a hoe appeared in speeches by union leaders and the clergy.

The poem begins:

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 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?



[Zoom in](#)

Edwin Markham's poetic description of the man in Jean-François Millet's painting *Man with a Hoe* was a useful symbol for

Both lyrical and political, Markham's poem fuses vivid descriptions of the man in Millet's painting with pointed questions implicating society's role in the working conditions of agricultural laborers. The poem and painting are powerful examples of the impact that the literary and visual arts can have on society.



Art and Poetry

Background Information

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References

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