

Ekphrastic Poetry Mini-Workshop



Presented by Tom House at The Watermill Center
part of The Parrish Art Museum's **PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT:
ART AND LANGUAGE WRITING WORKSHOP**

December 10, 9:30 am - 2:30 pm

Ekphrasis -- Greek for writing about objects and art -- has existed in the western world at least since Homer's description of Achilles' shield in *The Iliad*. ["Ode on a Grecian Urn" by John Keats](#) is just one of countless famous examples of the genre. Attached are two more contemporary free-verse poems beside the Van Gogh paintings that inspired them, Jane Flander's "Van Gogh's Bed" and Anne Sexton's "The Starry Night."

Ekphrastic poetry writing projects in my English classes at Bridgehampton School have produced some of the more original and gratifying creative works we do. In the past, those poems were usually responses to textbook or online reproductions of students' favorite paintings, such as *The Scream* or *American Gothic* -- until I discovered [The Watermill Center](#). The moment I stepped into the archives room and encountered its stunning, wide-ranging collection of objects, I thought, "Here's a room that could launch a thousand poems." Not long after, education program coordinator Andrea Cote and I arranged a remarkably successful Bridgehampton School pilot field trip to the Center. Students selected any object in the archives that intrigued them and, in no time at all, began writing. They continued working on and honing their poems back in class with the aid of peer and teacher feedback, and with photographs and memories of their experience, and two of the impressive results follow, beside the objects that inspired them.

On December 10th, I will overview the unit I conduct in my classes and lead participants through a compressed version of the student workshop at the Center. This includes a tour of the archives room, selection of an object, responses to a range of writing prompts, and time to leap from those notes into a free-verse poem of one's own unique form, or of a replicated or translated form of any of the ekphrastic poetry models we have on hand. The workshop culminates with a no-pressure, round-circle poetry share and the opportunity to discuss or ask questions about the process.

Feel free to contact me at the email below if you have questions. In the meantime, enjoy the poems!

-- Tom

Vincent's Bedroom in Arles

Vincent van Gogh (1888)



"Van Gogh's Bed" Jane Flanders (1985)

is orange,
like Cinderella's coach, like
the sun when he looked it
straight in the eye.

is narrow,
he sleeps alone, tossing
between two pillows, while it carried him
bumpily to the ball.

is clumsy,
but friendly. A peasant
built the frame; an old wife beat
the mattress till it rose like meringue.

is empty,
morning light pours in
like wine, melody, fragrance,
the memory of happiness.

Starry Night Vincent van Gogh (1889)



"The Starry Night" Anne Sexton (1961)

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 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:

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 King Has Fallen

The king has fallen.
All throughout the land of the living, people mourn his soul.
Their tears have fallen.
His people are frightened by what the future holds.
The cities have fallen.
No longer is the king able to rule over his nation.
Their society has fallen.
Decisions for everyday routines are now met with hesitation.
Their faith has fallen.
His people don't understand why God couldn't wait.
Deep into the earth, the royal casket has fallen,
And now the king is on his way to the pearly gates.

~ Autumn Street - *Bridgehampton School student*



The Cave Within a Mask

It is the tale of everyone's life
The feeling each person brings
The cave that everyone hides in
The shield every soldier stands with

It is the tale of a lonely soul
The jail for a guilty sin
The anticipation that boils within
The yearning for one to see the cave I am
hiding in

~ Amoy Webley - *Bridgehampton School student*