

**EKPHRASTIC POETRY:**  
*Exploring the Visual Arts with a Poet's Eye*

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**Overview**

As long as I have been involved in teaching creative writing to adolescents, ideas that use the visual arts as a catalyst for student writing have proliferated. But it wasn't until recently that I became aware that this type of writing had a name, ekphrastic poetry. Not only is there a name connected to writing in response to art, but a long history of the practice as well.

This curriculum explores the history of ekphrastic poetry, explains the benefits of using ekphrastic poetry in the classroom, and provides suggestions for presenting the poetry to children and methods for reading and discussing the published poetry in the classroom. In addition, it offers activities that encourage children to write their own poetry in response to art and techniques for helping children connect to visual images. Resources are provided for actually viewing art up close in the Pittsburgh community and there is a listing of the rich resources of museum collections available on the web.

Although I teach at the middle school level, activities that promote the writing of poetry in response to art are appropriate for every grade level, from first grade through university. The reader of this curriculum will find ideas appropriate for all ages.

The portion of the curriculum devoted to helping children write their own original ekphrastic poetry includes experiences I had with my own students. I was able to take my 8<sup>th</sup> grade creative writers to three art exhibits in Pittsburgh this year: the Cuban exhibit at the Mattress Factory, the Andy Warhol museum, and a show at Pitt's Frick Fine Arts Gallery titled "Out of Time, Out of Place, Out of China: Reinventing Chinese Tradition in a New Century." In addition, a small group of my students toured the Carnegie International. During these gallery

visits my students and I experimented with several strategies for viewing art, analyzing art, responding intellectually and emotionally to art, and writing poetry in response to art. In this section of the curriculum I share some of our experiences and identify the strengths and weaknesses of various approaches.

## Rationale

### Defining the Term and Tracing its History

As mentioned in the overview, many teachers at all levels use art as a catalyst for writing. It is interesting and worthwhile for both students and teachers to understand the history of this concept. The word itself has a long history as does the actual practice of writing ekphrastic poetry. The term has been defined with subtle differentiations by a variety of literary academics, as has the practice of writing ekphrastic poetry.

James A. W. Heffernan defines *ekphrasis* as "the literary representation of visual art." In his book, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashberry*, he states that ekphrasis is "Composed from the Greek words *ek* (out) and *phrazein* (tell, declare, pronounce), *ekphrasis* originally meant 'telling in full.' It has been variously defined. First employed as a rhetorical term in the second century A.D. to denote simply a vivid description, it was then (in the third century) made to designate the description of visual art. But it has not been confined to that meaning. In its first recorded appearance in English (1715), it was defined as 'a plain declaration or interpretation of a thing', and in a recent handbook of rhetorical terms it is called simply 'a self-contained description, often on a commonplace subject, which can be inserted at a fitting place in a discourse'. My own definition of ekphrasis follows the lead of the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, which defines it as 'the rhetorical description of a work of art.' "

Other academics discuss the term in relation to Horace's *Ars Poetica*. Quintus Horatius Flaccus, known in English as Horace, was born in 65 B.C., and was a leading philosopher. According to Terry Blackhawk, in his article titled, "Ekphrastic Poetry, Entering and Giving Voice to Works of Art," "Horace's *Ars Poetica* expressed the ekphrastic ideal of giving voice to painting and had as a principle, *ut picture poesis* poetry as a speaking picture and painting as mute poetry."

The earliest examples of ekphrastic poetry are focused on utilitarian objects such as goblets, urns, vases, chests, cloaks, weapons and armor, and architectural ornaments. These early ekphrastic poems were usually part of larger

units like the epic or pastoral poem. Most texts agree that the “original” classic ekphrastic poem was a description of Achilles’ shield in the 18<sup>th</sup> book of Homer’s the *Iliad*.

Some other noteworthy historical examples of ekphrastic poetry are Keat’s “Ode to a Grecian Urn,” William Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey,” John Ashbery’s “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror,” and William Carlos Williams’, “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus.” More contemporary examples include Sylvia Plath’s “Colossus,” and Robert Hayden’s “Night Blooming Cereus.”

It seems that ekphrastic poetry is enjoying a resurgence of interest in certain poetic communities. Jennifer Bosveld, the author of several books on ekphrastic poetry, says that the terms ekphrasis and ekphrastic are making their way back into dictionaries. Up until ten years ago the word remained only in the *Oxford* dictionary. A recent Google search turned up over one thousand links when ekphrastic poetry was entered. The links connect the interested reader to published anthologies, university experts, references to ekphrastic poetry in studies of most historically respected poets, websites and chat rooms discussing the writing of ekphrastic poetry, and teachers using the ideas in elementary schools through universities. There is even a literary journal called *Ekphrasis* that publishes the work of contemporary poets who write in response to art.

## **Objectives**

There are many objectives associated with this curriculum unit. The objectives fall into three categories: objectives relating to reading and interpreting poetry; objectives related to writing poetry; and objectives related to learning about the visual arts.

### **Objectives Related to Reading and Interpreting Poetry**

Until recently, all of my energies concerning the reading of poetry with middle school aged children focused on making poetry accessible and non-threatening. I did insist that students use textual evidence to support their interpretations and always attempted to use the language of poetry in discussions. Recently, I have tried to include even more vocabulary and formal interpretive models into discussion formats. This is in response to clearer guidelines given by the state of Pennsylvania regarding expectations. It is also a nod to the idea that many of my students will be involved in AP courses in high school and early exposure to the kinds of rigorous poetic interpretations required in those classes can only be beneficial. Here are 5 objectives concerning reading and interpreting poetry. Students will:

- build and use a vocabulary of poetic terms

- use textual evidence to support interpretations of poetry
- identify themes in poems
- place ekphrastic poems in various categories
- discuss poetic form and how it aids in communicating the poem's message

### Objectives Related to Writing Original Poetry

Writing poetry meets many objectives for adolescents related to literacy, aesthetic development, metacognitive understandings, and awareness of self and the world.

In the category of literacy, writing poetry helps students in all genres of writing. Writing poetry aids students in understanding the importance of careful word choice, especially active, vivid verbs and specific nouns. Adolescents who write poetry learn to play with phrase construction, and learn that lines and sentences need careful attention.

Writing poetry aids children in developing a love of language, a love of the word. As poet Nikki Grimes said, “No matter how you slice it, language is powerful, and poetry is a distillation of that power. Penning poetry stretches the mind and awakens the imagination. And isn't that what teaching is all about?” Adolescent poets are trained not only to observe the external world, but to connect with their inner world as well.

Metacognatively, when adolescents write poetry, then share it and revise it, they are in touch with their thought processes possibly more in depth than at any other school task. They must probe their intellects and their hearts simultaneously, for it is this combination that makes a poet. Writing poetry:

- trains the writer in metaphorical thinking
- forces the young writer to observe his or her external world
- encourages the young writer to pay attention to what's inside, the inner world
- invites students to experiment with language
- forces the young writer to choose the very best word
- allows the young writer to experiment with phrasing and the rearranging of words

### Objectives Related to Viewing Art

Another category of objectives for this unit relate to exposing students to visual art and bringing a renewed attention to visual art. In the introduction to *With a Poet's Eye – A Tate Gallery Anthology*, Pat Adams writes that, “Less than a minute is usually the most that is given to works of art encountered on a gallery visit. To extend this fleeting glance into something more prolonged and reflective

has long been the ambition of gallery curators the world over.” When students are challenged to write ekphrastic poetry, they most certainly must spend more than a minute with the art work. Students will:

- spend time noticing details in a work of art
- describe meanings found in a work of art
- question the artist’s purpose
- consider the medium used by the artist

## Strategies

### Locating Ekphrastic Poetry to Present to Students

It should be fairly easy for teachers to find published ekphrastic poetry for their students to read. I recommend the purchase of a book that was actually created for young people and is available through Scholastic book clubs, *Heart to Heart: New Poems Inspired by Twentieth-Century American Art*. The editor of the collection, Jan Greenberg, does not even use the term ekphrastic poetry in her introduction, but she does acknowledge its history by discussing Homer and Keats. This book is appropriate for grades 5 – 12, because the artwork is colorful and inviting, and the poems are accessible and easily interpreted. In addition, the poems represent a variety of approaches to writing ekphrastic poetry: describing the art, telling a narrative story based on the art, responding to a theme or an emotion stimulated by the art, and writing from the point of view of the artist. In fact, Greenberg divides the poetry into four sections: stories, voices, impressions, and expressions.

Other collections of ekphrastic poetry are available and include work that is appropriate for adolescents. They include *With a Poet’s Eye: A Tate Gallery Anthology*, edited by Pat Adams; *Transforming Vision: Writings on Art*, selected and introduced by Edward Hirsch; and *Elastic Ekphrastic*, edited by Jennifer Bosveld.

If the teacher prefers to use ekphrastic poetry that is available on line, there are several recommended sites.

<http://www.dwpoet.com/poetassign.html>

This wonderful site, called Ekphrastic Excursions, contains 40 poems with the images. A professor at Wheaton College, David Wright, maintains this site for his students. It contains a broad representation of contemporary poets as well as some more classic poets. The poets represented include W.H. Auden, Gwen Brooks, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Allen Ginsberg, Robert Hayden, Lisel Mueller,

Frank O'Hara, W.D. Snodgrass, Wislawa Szymborska, and William Carlos Williams. The artwork that the poets respond to is contemporary and classic. When I present various categories of ekphrastic poetry later in the curriculum, I will direct the reader to many samples on this site.

[http://www.people.virginia.edu/~djr4r/anth\\_poems.html](http://www.people.virginia.edu/~djr4r/anth_poems.html)

Traditional ekphrastic poems: William Wordsworth, 1798; John Keats, "Ode On a Grecian Urn, 1819; Frank O'Hara, "Why I Am Not a Painter," 1956; John Ashbery, "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," 1975; as well as a collection of poetry written in response to the Mona Lisa are available here.

### Techniques for Presenting the Work

Presenting published poetry to middle school children has its own set of challenges. I have developed several techniques for making poetry accessible for this age group. The first method is a simple approach that can be done with an entire class. First, I encourage at least three oral readings of the poem. This can be done in a variety of ways; either with student volunteers reading the poem in its entirety, or by dividing the poem into stanzas or lines, and "reading around". After the final reading, students are asked to identify three things in the poem. First, they must place a \* by the line or phrase that they like the most, for any reason. It may be because of the meaning, the unique word choice, the metaphorical language, or simply because of its originality. Second, they must underline the line or phrase that is the most important to them in the poem. The third response is placing a ? next to a line or phrase they don't understand. After students spend a few minutes privately responding to the poem, the class discussion can begin in several ways. Often I ask students what they want to start with, the \*'s or the ?'s. Or, I may simply say that everyone is to first share his or her \*ed phrase or line. Whatever approach, this method usually assures that all students have been able to "grab onto" something in the poem. The discussion usually blossoms.

A second method involves dividing the class into small groups of 3 or 4 students. Each group is presented with a poem and a criteria sheet for how the poem must be presented to the class. The criteria list includes such items as: presents poem in clear and creative manner, discusses overall meaning of the poem, supports interpretations with textual evidence, clarifies who is "speaking" in the poem, and identifies poetic techniques such as figurative language and images. Groups are given 15 to 30 minutes to prepare and are presented with the challenge of introducing (presenting) and interpreting the poem for the class. Again, after the group presentation, the entire class should participate in a discussion.

Finally, when I want students to spend a longer amount of time exploring a poem individually, I use a reader response guide. Students read the poem independently and give written responses to the following questions: What do you notice about the poem? What words, lines, images stand out? What do you like, immediately? What don't you like? What was puzzling? What was surprising? What does the poem make you feel? What does the poem make you think of? What does the image allow you to imagine or fantasize? What assumptions have you made about the poet, about who's speaking, and about what's happening? What questions do you have for the poem? After students have made personal responses to the poem, the entire class discusses the poem, using the same questions as starting points. After the class discussions, students should return to their original responses and write further on the questions: Why did you find yourself paying attention to these elements? What made you react that way? What sense might this make now? Why did you respond that way? What (in the poem or in what you brought to it) evoked these thoughts?

As the class discusses the ekphrastic poetry, a word wall of poetic terms should be available. Students should be encouraged to use the terms when discussing the poetry. Some of the terms appropriate for middle school students are: allegory, alliteration, allusion, assonance, consonance, elegy, enjambment, free verse, image, internal rhyme, line break, lyric, metaphor, meter, narrative, ode, persona, personification, refrain, rhyme, rhythm, simile, slant rhyme, sonnet, stanza, symbol, synecdoche, theme, and voice.

Also, during the class discussion, the teacher must always hold the student to using textual evidence in his or her interpretation. Middle school children, like all readers, tend to find a single phrase or image in a poem that "hits home" and then take their interpretation on a path clearly not intended by the poet. Insisting on a close adherence to the words on the page is excellent training for all close reading that they will need to do in their high school and college careers. Introducing the notion of close reading at this age is important.

In addition to the above mentioned methods of reading poetry with adolescents, the following questions relate specifically to reading ekphrastic poetry. These questions are good ones to consider before students are asked to categorize the ekphrastic poems they read. These general ideas were suggested by Kelly Hammond at the Cincinnati Country Day School.

- What's the point of view of the poem? Does the poet "enter" the painting and join its world? Does the poet create a voice for an object or figure in the art? Is the poet a spectator? Participant? Art critic?
- What part of the art work has inspired the poet's reaction? Is the poet sympathetic? Compassionate?

- To what is the poet responding: the subject? The technique? The history? The artist?
- Does the poet make mention of the time difference between when he/she writes and when the work was created?
- What special language does the poet employ to deal with the art work?
- Is the point of the poem the same as that of the art work?

Most certainly it is important to share ekphrastic poetry that represents the many approaches that poets take to writing about art. After a general discussion of selected poems, students can be asked to categorize poems according to the groupings listed here. More than one of the classifications listed below can be found in a single poem.

Giving Voice to the Art In this category of ekphrastic poetry, the poet can take on the persona of a figure or an object in the artwork. Says Jan Greenberg, “by projecting his or her spirit into the artwork, each poet gets closer to the feeling expressed by the artist.” In *Heart to Heart*, “From Above” and “Breaking Away From the Family,” illustrate this type of ekphrastic poetry.

Praising the Art Poets might tell what attracted them to the art, or discuss techniques like the artists’ use of light or creation of mood. In Jan Greenberg’s book *Heart to Heart*, she calls this type of ekphrastic poetry expressions. “Mobile/Stabile,” a poem written by Ronald Wallace for Alexander Calder and “Man Ray Stares into the Future of Jazz: 1919,” by David Clewell are examples of this type of ekphrastic poetry and can be found in Greenberg’s book.

Using the Artwork to Examine Personal Issues Many poets are able to come to grips with personal issues through the examination of an artwork. Images may enable poets to write about death of loved ones or difficult interpersonal relationships. “Naming,” by Joy Harjo, in *Heart to Heat*, is a good example of this category. Robert Hayden wrote a poem to Monet’s Waterlillies, seeking refuge from the racial conflicts in Selma, Alabama. This poem can be found on Wright’s website, Ekphrastic Excursions.

Close Study of a Single Artist Some ekphrastic poets have an intimate knowledge of the life of the artist and use selected details about that life in their poems. For instance, Terry Blackhawk calls our attention to a poem by Patricia Hooper, “In Monet’s Garden,” that uses quotes from the artists’ diary to reveal the interest he took in the change of colors in his dying wife’s complexion. From Wright’s website, “Cloud Painter,” by Jane Flanders talks about the life and art of John Constable. William Carlos Williams wrote a series of poems in response to paintings by Pieter Brueghel. Six of them can be found on Wright’s website.

Writing in Response to Abstract Art Many samples of this type of ekphrastic poetry are available. On Wright's website one can find Gwen Brooks' "The Chicago Picasso" and "Number 1 by Jackson Pollock" written by Nancy Sullivan. "Pas de Trois," by Sandy Asher, is written in response to another Jackson Pollock piece, Number 27 and can be found in *Heart To Heart*. "On Lichtenstein's 'Bananas and Grapefruit,'" by Deborah Pope presents a playful approach to contemporary art and "Lessons from a Painting by Rothko," by Bobbi Katz, uses an untitled work to discuss "painting a poem." These last two examples can also be found in *Heart To Heart*.

Recreation of the Visual Object Through Verbal Means - Jan Greenberg calls this classification "impressions". Poems in this category can be carefully constructed images or word pictures. But many go beyond mere descriptions and move toward interpretation of the visual. As Terry Blackhawk points out, Rilke, when choosing words to write about Paul Cezanne's work, reveals more than a surface or intellectual understanding. "Instead of a language that labels, Rilke gives us language that responds: a "deeply quilted blue," a "listening blue," and a "self-contained blue." From the book *Heart to Heart* one can find "On a Windy Wash Day Morn," by Brenda Seabrooke; "Big French Bread," by Marvin Bell and "The Poppy of Georgia O'Keeffe". From David Wright's website, Stephen Doyben's poem, "The Street," represents this type.

Creating Narrative From the Art Sometimes the artwork allows the poet to recall a memory that is then recreated, or often the image encourages the poet to create a fictional story. In *Heart to Heart*, I suggest using "Down by the Riverside," "The Brown Bomber," and "Early Sunday Morning" to illustrate this type of ekphrastic poetry. A poem written by Liesel Mueller in response to a painting by Paul Delvaux called "The Village of the Mermaids" can be found on David Wright's website.

Museum Ekphrasis This category of response includes poets who choose to write about an entire museum, or a particular exhibit or group of artworks.

Blackhawk on "Entering Art" Although Terry Blackhawk acknowledges all of the categories of ekphrastic poetry listed above, when he works with young people he places emphasis on the somewhat abstract notion of "entering art." Blackhawk quotes Jane Hirschfield, "the moment willed effort falls away and we fall utterly into the object of our attention."

## Viewing Artwork

### *Student Friendly Galleries and Museums in the Pittsburgh Area*

Pittsburgh is filled with galleries and museums that encourage students to visit. Our most famous art museum, Carnegie Museum of Art, Oakland, 412-622-3131, [www.carnegiemuseums.org](http://www.carnegiemuseums.org), provides many programs for students and employs a large staff of museum educators and docents. Although many of their student packages are pre-organized, they are willing to work with a teacher to plan a visit that can meet the needs of the particular group.

The education department of the *Mattress Factory*, on Pittsburgh's north side, continues to grow. This very unique museum houses installation art and many art enthusiasts from around the country and the world visit it as a destination. This museum is especially welcoming to students for many reasons. The spaces are large and student groups feel free to move around and find private places to write. In addition, during the school week there are rarely crowds and students can feel free to linger and take as much time as necessary in the galleries. [www.mattress.org](http://www.mattress.org)

My students and I visited the University of Pittsburgh's *University Art Gallery* in the Frick Fine Arts Building this year. This space includes three spacious galleries that literally begged my students to linger, stretch out on the floor or benches, and write. Although there is no educational outreach program, the director was more than happy to find a graduate student to give my students a tour. <http://vrcoll.fa.pitt.edu/uag/>

Other galleries and museums worth exploring are The Andy Warhol Museum, North Side, 412-237-8300, [www.warhol.org](http://www.warhol.org); the Chatham College Art Gallery, Shadyside, 412-365-1778; Regina Gouger Miller Gallery, Carnegie Mellon University, 412-268-3618, [artserver.cfa.cmu.edu/~miller/about](http://artserver.cfa.cmu.edu/~miller/about); Wood Street Galleries, Downtown, 412-471-5605, [www.woodstreetgalleries.org/contact.html](http://www.woodstreetgalleries.org/contact.html); Silver Eye Center for Photography, South Side, 412-431-1810, [www.silvereye.org](http://www.silvereye.org); Pittsburgh Center for the Arts, Shadyside, 412-361-0873, [www.pittsburgharts.org](http://www.pittsburgharts.org); Manchester Craftsmen's Guild, North Side, 412-322-1773, [www.manchestercraftsmen.org](http://www.manchestercraftsmen.org); and The Frick Art & Historical Center, Point Breeze, 412-371-0600, [www.frickart.org](http://www.frickart.org).

### *General Suggestions for Taking Student Groups to Art Museums and Galleries*

Most of the major art museums in the United States have large education department and their websites include various tips for initial excursions into galleries. These plans for viewing galleries assume that students will have some

degree of freedom in the galleries. I feel that this is extremely important for the teacher to organize. Although it is always beneficial for students to take a gallery tour led by a trained docent, time should also be provided for students to choose artworks and spend more time with one or more pieces. Some of the other tips offered by these museum education departments include:

- Look around the entire exhibition to get the big picture.
- Spend more time looking closely at a handful of works that catch your eye.
- Trust your responses. There is no right or wrong reaction to an artwork.
- Share your responses with others who are viewing the exhibit. Your own understanding can be enhanced by listening carefully to others' ideas and interpretations.
- Art is sometimes intended to provoke strong reactions. What feelings are in you? What in the artwork is causing them?

#### *Questions to Aid Students in Their Observations*

Since one of the goals of this unit is to encourage students to spend more than the average 30 seconds viewing a piece of art, it is important for the teacher to consider ways to encourage an intense viewing. One way is to offer questions to students when they visit a museum or gallery. In the appendix you will find a handout that offers 16 questions for students to answer when sitting or standing in front of a piece of art. Some of the questions encourage close observations, such as "How would you describe the shapes in this piece of art? The lines? The colors? The Textures?" "What things seem new to you in this piece of art? What surprises you?" Other questions ask the students to consider the artist: "What do you think the artist's message might be?" Also included on the handout are questions that lead the students to personally relate to the art: "What does this piece remind you of? What mood or personality does this piece of art project? What sounds would this piece of art make if it could?"

Terry Blackhawk, who has worked with high school students in the Detroit area, finds that children don't need a heavy introduction into the art, or a list of questions to stimulate their thinking. He directs students to "Go into it." He tells them to, "Use your senses." This instruction, he says, is usually enough. I tend to be more structured in my teaching style and prefer the use of questions to stimulate and direct the viewing of art by students.

In addition to spending a good amount of time with their chosen artwork, students might have luck in finding the images online and therefore engage even more closely in reflection. As mentioned earlier, large art museums often have extensive representation of their work online. However, even smaller galleries

with temporary shows may put the artists' work online. Both small galleries that my students visited this year posted the work of the artists on their websites.

### Helping Students Write Their Own Ekphrastic Poetry

If students have read a good variety of published ekphrastic poems and they have spent time viewing artwork, the next step of writing their own ekphrastic poetry should come easily. The amount of experience students have in writing poetry can dictate how the teacher chooses to begin the writing portion of this curriculum.

One way for teachers to begin is by encouraging students to notice craft in published poems. Earlier in the curriculum, poems were read for the purpose of understanding the various approaches writers of ekphrastic poetry can take. Suggestions were also given to help students understand and interpret poetry. Teacher and students can return to the same poems and begin to notice style and craft issues. Some things they might want to notice are use of images, original metaphorical thought, line lengths and stanza breaks, precision of word choice and titles. These can be the same elements that a teacher encourages students to include in their own poems.

Students may have opportunities to actually write in the galleries. But if time does not allow this, at least they will have taken notes when at the galleries or filled out a questionnaire similar to the one provided in the appendix. Upon returning to the classroom, discussion can help to refresh the memories of students and they should be encouraged to review their notes as well.

### Encouraging Revision of Poems

The amount of revision expected will vary greatly from classroom to classroom, depending on the experience of the students. A very basic revision list that I have used with inexperienced poets and that can be covered in a single class period includes checking for active, vivid verbs and specific nouns; making sure that all line breaks represent thoughtful decisions on the part of the poet; adding similes, metaphors, and personification and making sure they are not clichés; looking for and adding concrete language and strong sensory images; and questioning the use of rhyme and making sure it does not detract from the meaning of the poem.

Another more advanced checklist for revising poetry is available at the internet site, *Fooling With Words With Bill Moyers*.  
[http://www.pbs.org/wnet/foolingwithwords/main\\_revise.html](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/foolingwithwords/main_revise.html) This comprehensive list was developed by Peter Murphy, a high school English teacher in New Jersey and calls attention to elements such as: cliché, abstract, verbs, risk and compress.

Also available on this website is a great lesson on revision where several drafts of poems by Robert Hayden are available. Students are able to analyze his revisions and discuss the benefits of them.

### **Classroom Activities**

Presented here is a plan for a 9 day unit on ekphrastic poetry. The teacher can easily borrow ideas for a single day or a single trip to a museum.

#### **DAY 1**

Introduce the term ekphrastic poetry. Note the word's origins and the long history of ekphrastic poetry.

Send the students on an internet quest to find some interesting examples of ekphrastic poetry. Instruct them to go to the two sites listed earlier in the curriculum:

<http://www.dwpoet.com/poetassign.html>  
[http://www.people.virginia.edu/~djr4r/anth\\_poems.html](http://www.people.virginia.edu/~djr4r/anth_poems.html)

Assign two tasks at these websites: First, each student should choose one poem that he or she especially likes. Students should print out this poem and the art. Second, each student should find poems that fit into the various categories of ekphrastic poetry listed in the strategies section of this curriculum. Challenge students to find poems for at least 5 different categories.

If the class has copies of *Heart to Heart* or any of the other ekphrastic anthologies mentioned earlier, the same activity can be done with books.

#### **DAY 2**

Choose three or four ekphrastic poems for class discussion. Provide each student with a copy of the poems. Read each poem at least three times. Instruct students to use the \*, ?, underline method discussed in the strategies section of the curriculum. Use the student responses as a beginning of discussion. Remind students to use textual evidence when discussing the poems and use as many poetry terms as possible.

#### **DAY 3**

Instruct students to bring to class the poems they found during their internet search. Assign three tasks to help them individually respond to the poem they have chosen. First, direct them to answer the questions that appeared earlier in the strategies section:

- What's the point of view of the poem? Does the poet "enter" the painting and join its world? Does the poet create a voice for an object or figure in the art? Is the poet a spectator? Participant? Art critic?
- What part of the art work has inspired the poet's reaction? Is the poet sympathetic? Compassionate?
- To what is the poet responding: the subject? The technique? The history? The artist?
- Does the poet make mention of the time difference between when he/she writes and when the work was created?
- What special language does the poet employ to deal with the art work?
- Is the point of the poem the same as that of the art work?

Second, instruct them to list all of the categories of ekphrastic poetry that their piece might fall into. Third, challenge them to answer the reader response questions found in the appendix.

#### DAY 4

Break the students into small groups of 3 to 5 students. Direct them to share their poems with each other, using highlights from their independent work the previous day.

#### DAY 5

Challenge students to write a formal response to a poetry essay about their chosen ekphrastic poem. Use the assignment sheet in the appendix.

#### DAY 6

Visit an art gallery or museum. Instruct the children to use the questions in appendix #4 to respond to one or more works of art. If a field trip is not possible, direct students to one of the on-line galleries listed in appendix # 1. Another alternative is to use prints, book collections, or even art work created by students in the visual arts class at school.

#### DAY 7

This day should be devoted to writing original ekphrastic poetry. Challenge students to refer to the questionnaires they filled out at the museum or gallery. If students want to spend more time with the chosen piece of art, they may be able to access it online.

#### DAY 8

Use this day for poetry revision. Students can be given a revision checklist such as the one found in the appendix and challenged to use it as a guide. Another approach is to form small peer response groups of 3 to 5 students. In this scenario each student should be provided with a copy of the poems to be revised. Even

with this approach students should be encouraged to follow suggestions on the revision hand out.

#### DAY 9

Students should publicly share their original poetry. This can be done in the form of a poetry reading in the class or a bulletin board display.

#### EXTENDED ACTIVITIES

1. Revisit the museum or gallery and conduct a poetry reading in front of each piece of art.
2. Publish an anthology of the student work, including images of the art.

## **Annotated Bibliography**

Adams, Pat, ed. *With a Poet's Eye: A Tate Gallery Anthology*. London: Tate Gallery Publications, 1986. Although currently out of print, this anthology is available in libraries and used book collections. The poems were all commissioned by the Tate Gallery in London. The art represented here is a good combination of contemporary art and classic art.

Blackhawk, Terry. "Ekphrastic Poetry: Entering and Giving Voice to Works of Art," in *Third Mind: Creative Writing Through Visual Art*. Teachers and Writers Collaborative, New York, 2002. ISBN 0-915924-94-3  
Reading Terry Blackhawk's article in this book was the first time I encountered the term ekphrastic poetry. Terry is a poet who works in schools. His ideas are excellent and he provides a clear explanation of the history of ekphrastic poetry. The entire book is worth owning.

Bosveld, Jennifer, ed. *Elastic Ekphrastic: Poetry on Art/Poets on Tour through Galleries*. ISBN 1-58998-166-9  
Published by the largest literary small press in America, Pudding House Publications in Ohio, this slim volume offers Jennifer Bosveld's comments on ekphrastic poetry and poems written by a local writers group after visiting galleries in Columbus, Ohio.

Greenberg, Jan, ed. *Heart to Heart: New Poems Inspired by Twentieth-Century American Art*. Harry N. Abrams, Inc., New York, 2001. ISBN: 0-8109-9087-3  
A book created for children, I recommend that all teachers purchase this volume if possible. The art is beautiful and the poems are all easily understood by adolescents.

Heffernan, James A. W., *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery*. University of Chicago Press, 2004. ISBN 0-226-32314-5  
This scholarly text contains sections called "Homer, Virgil, Dante: A Genealogy of Ekphrasis," "Ekphrastic Metamorphoses of the Philomela Myth from Ovid to Shakespeare," and "Modern and Postmodern Ekphrasis."

Hirsch, E., ed. *Transforming Vision: Writers on Art*. Art Institute of Chicago, 1994. ISBN 0-8212-2126-4  
This is a beautiful collection of poetry, prose, and art. All of the art is in the collection of the Art Institute of Chicago. Some of the poetry was written for this anthology; thirty poets were commissioned to write for this publication. Some of the contemporary writers include John Wideman, Rita Dove, Stanley Kunitz, John Hollander, Susan Sontag, and Joyce Carol Oates.

Hollander, John. *The Gazer's Spirit: Poems Speaking to Silent Works of Art*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995.

Mitchell, W.J.T., "Ekphrasis and the Other," from *Picture Theory*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1994.

<http://www.rc.umd.edu/editions/shelley/medusa/mitchell.html>

<http://wwwf.countryday.net/FacStf/us/hammondk/Ekprasis/Default.htm>

A teacher created lesson plan with good suggestions and links to ekphrasis poetry from history.

<http://www.english.emory.edu/Paintings&Poems/> This website for a course in American Poetry at Emory University provides a large collection of well known American Ekphrastic poetry

[www.puddinghouse.com/ekphrastic.htm](http://www.puddinghouse.com/ekphrastic.htm) Featuring an interview with Jennifer Bosveld and examples of her ekphrastic poetry, this website offers clear explanations of the poet's own methods of writing as well as information about the history of ekphrastic poetry.

[www.people.virginia.edu/~djr4r/anth\\_poems..html](http://www.people.virginia.edu/~djr4r/anth_poems..html) Another website from a university course, this site contains more ekphrastic poems and their artworks from world literature.

<http://hometown.aol.com/ekphrasis1/index.html>

Website for the Ekphrasis Poetry Journal, a publication of poetry written in response to art.

<http://www.dwpoet.com/poetassign.html> David Wright, a professor at Wheaton College, maintains this site for his students. It includes links to a variety of definitions of Ekphrastic poetry, links to over 45 Ekphrastic poems and artworks, and links to scholarly writing concerning Ekphrastic poetry.

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/foolingwithwords/> This site was created to accompany a PBS special series several years ago. It featured Bill Moyers and interviews with many contemporary poets. The site is extensive and offers many ideas for teachers of poetry. In this curriculum the reader is directed to sections on poetry revision.

## Appendix #1

### MUSEUM COLLECTIONS AVAILABLE ON THE WEB

<http://www.metmuseum.org/home.asp> Metropolitan Museum of Art

<http://www.getty.edu/> The Getty Museum

<http://www.guggenheimcollection.org/index.html> The Guggenheim in New York City

<http://www.louvre.fr/louvrea.htm> The Louvre in Paris

<http://www.metmuseum.org/home.asp> The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City

<http://www.moma.org/collection/search.php> The Museum of Modern Art in New York City

<http://www.artsconnected.org/art/> Walker Art Center Minneapolis Institute of Arts

<http://www.nmwa.org/> National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington DC

<http://americanart.si.edu/index3.cfm> The Smithsonian American Art Museum (The Renwick)

<http://www.nmafa.si.edu/pubaccess/index.htm> The National Museum of African Art

Appendix #2

**READER RESPONSE TO POETRY**

*I. READ DOWN THE POEM A FEW TIMES AND JOT DOWN WHATEVER COME TO YOU: FIRST IMPRESSIONS, OBSERVATIONS, REACTIONS, FEELINGS, THOUGHTS, IDEAS, MEMORIES, ASSOCIATIONS, QUESTIONS.*

1. What do you notice about the poem?
2. What words, lines, images stand out?
3. What do you like, immediately?
4. What don't you like?
5. What was puzzling?
6. What was surprising?
7. What does the poem make you feel?
8. What does the poem make you think of?
9. What does the image allow you to imagine or fantasize?
10. What assumptions have you made
  - about the poet?
  - about who's speaking?
  - about what's happening?

*II. READ THROUGH THE POEM A FEW MORE TIMES AND READ WHAT YOU WROTE ORIGINALLY. MAKE MORE NOTES IN RESPONSE TO THESE QUESTIONS:*

1/2. Why did you find yourself paying attention to these elements?

3/4. What made you react that way?

5. What sense might this make now?

6/7. Why did you respond that way?

8/9. What (in the poem or in what you brought to it) evoked these thoughts?

Appendix # 3

**ASSIGNMENT SHEET FOR ESSAY IN RESPONSE TO EKPHRASTIC  
POETRY**

*Write a two page essay in which you analyze and discuss a selected ekphrastic poem.*

1. Write an engaging introduction in which you identify the poem's title, author, and art work it was written to.
2. In the body of the essay be sure to do the following:
  - Summarize the poem's content
  - Discuss the poet's approach to the poem. Does the poet create a narrative from the art? Does the poet "enter" the painting and join its world? Does the poet create a voice for an object or figure in the art? Is the poet a spectator? Is the poem a description or a revelation of a single moment? Does the poem convey a political or social comment?
  - Tell who the speaker is and to whom the poem is addressed. Is the speaker the poet or an invented character? Then discuss the speaker's tone. Is it sincere, ironic, intimate, matter of fact, mocking, distant, contemplative, or questioning?
  - Is the point of the poem the same as that of the art work?
  - Point out the strongest elements of the poem. What makes the poem effective: word choice, image, metaphor, form, rhythm, etc?
3. Be sure to use textual evidence to support your observations and analyses.
4. Write a conclusion that summarizes your thoughts and encourages the reader to explore the poem.

Appendix #4  
**Responding to Art**

**Student Name** \_\_\_\_\_ **Artist** \_\_\_\_\_

**Title of Piece** \_\_\_\_\_

1. List 15 words to describe this piece of art.

2. How would you describe the shapes in their piece of art?

The lines?

The colors?

The textures?

3. What sounds would this piece of art make if it could? (Sounds like...)

4. What does this piece of art remind you of?

5. What things do you recognize in this piece of art?

6. What things seem new to you about this art work? What surprises you?

7. What interests you in this artwork?

8. Give this piece of art a new title.
9. What mood or personality does this piece of art project?
10. How do you personally relate to this piece of art? What does it remind you of in your life?
11. What do you think the artists message might be?
12. What is the most important thing about this artwork?
13. What feature of this piece of art look really hard to do? What features appear easy but might actually be hard?
14. What would you do with this artwork if you owned it?
15. Finish these statements about this piece of art:
  - I was caught off guard by.....
  - It was more than just color, lines, and shapes, it was.....
  - I didn't realize what I was seeing until.....
  - I became part of the artwork when I.....
16. What reactions might other people have to this piece of art?

Appendix # 5

**Pittsburgh Public Schools Content Standards**

*The following content standards are addressed by this unit.*

**Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening.**

2. All students read and use a variety of methods to make sense of various kinds of complex texts.
4. All students write for a variety of purposes.

**Science and Technology**

9. All students demonstrate basic computer literacy, including word processing, software applications, and the ability to access the global information infrastructure, using current technology.

**Arts and Humanities**

1. All students describe the meanings they find in various works from the visual and performing arts and literature on the basis of aesthetic understanding of the art form.