

What Is Ekphrastic Poetry

by Ashby Kinch, Ph.D.

The rich tradition of poetic writing about art extends back to the earliest extant text of Greek literature, Homer's *Iliad*. In Book 18, just before the decisive battle where Achilles kills the great Trojan warrior, Hector, Homer inserts the famous description of the Shield of Achilles, [which occupies 130 lines of intricate poetry](#). The passage is the *locus classicus*, or exemplary instance, of ekphrasis, which etymologically means "speaking from," but in classical poetics referred to the incorporation of a descriptive passage of a work of visual art into a poem.

Ekphrastic writing usually includes some account of the object's physical attributes, but also, importantly, uses the resources of verbal art to extend ideas, concepts, or symbolic values. In Homer's case, the Shield describes a range of human social and cultural practice: field planting and harvesting, animal husbandry, dancing, a wedding, and the siege of a city.

(For a modern "re-creation" of what the shield might have looked like, see: <https://theshieldofachilles.net/appearance/>).

Later Roman authors, especially Catullus and Virgil, picked up this idea that the device of describing a work of art can concentrate attention on fundamental questions of human value. In Catullus' famous miniature epic, [Carmen 64](#), the ekphrasis describing a marriage couch designed for the wedding of Peleus and Thetis becomes the occasion for an amplification of the question of human fidelity.

Ekphrastic poets also use the occasion of writing about visual art to explore their poetic craft, attending to what a poem can do that a work of art does not do, and vice versa. The ekphrastic poet models ways of looking at, being with, and responding to, the art work that also model the kinds of curiosity, engagement, and openness that make for a richly lived life. Through contact with the poet's words, the reader's mind can travel into these spaces, where they can explore the values, ideas, and problems that an artistic tradition transmits.

(For a range of modern ekphrastic poems, see: https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/browse#page=1&sort_by=recently_added&forms=289)

M.L. Smoker and Melissa Kwasny's ambitious and thoughtful project thus joins a rich poetic tradition, whose practices they are directing in a unique way to draw the public's attention to the treasures of our state's cultural heritage. By moving through the wide geographical span of our sprawling state, they incite the curiosity of readers. Reading them, you will be inspired to encounter these works in person, to visit them and their counterparts in

these spaces that constitute such an essential part of our common cultural legacy, one that requires us constantly to re-write its importance. In addition to an aesthetic encounter, theirs is a project of civic engagement. As Homer long ago understood, our art is also the place where we shape our cultural values, our core ideas about what we share in common, as well as what work we have left to do.

Mandy and Melissa have given us a powerful testimonial witness to what that can mean in contemporary Montana. Maybe we can supplement classical notions of ekphrasis with this idea of becoming an artistic witness, which implies seeing, looking, reflecting, and, most importantly, speaking. Kevin Young, who serves as Director of the African-American Museum of History and Culture, emphasizes that without speaking, you are not a witness, but an onlooker: a well-curated museum has a “poetics” of witness that spurs us to speak our truths.

As we lift out of the fog of COVID, and as we move out of our isolated confines to circulate in the world more freely, may these poems provide witness that inspires more thoughtful looking, more perceptive engagement, and, above all, lots of traffic to these diverse sites of culture where we re-invent community.