



Beyond the Canvas

by Kathryn Kleekamp

"Poetry and art are ways to communicate with paradise." William Blake

One of my greatest rewards as an artist comes when a viewer finds personal meaning in my work. Usual approval comes in the form of an email nod of appreciation or a pleasant handwritten note.

Imagine my surprise when I received an email from a woman who had been touched by my painting, Winter Hoxie House and to show thanks was sending me an "ekphrasis."

My immediate thought was this might be some type of Greek pastry. Perhaps that was her specialty, one creative effort rewarded by another. I couldn't be more mistaken.

Although not edible in the regular sense, ekphrasis is indeed a gift that nourishes one's inner spirit and fuels imagination. As I later learned, ekphrasis is one of the oldest types of writing about or for art.

Coined by the Greeks, "ek" and "phrasis" mean "out" and "speak" respectively; literally meaning to speak out or explain. This ancient literary form strives to show what the eye may not see in an original work of art, to elevate and transform it, thus acting as a guide for a deeper visionary experience.

While writing inspired by art is relatively common, ekphrasis goes beyond the mere description of an image. Common descriptive writing of artwork is generally limited to what the viewer sees, how the elements are arranged, how they interact with each other, or the role of brushstroke, color, and mood.

Ekphrastic writing, in contrast, puts the subject of the painting in historical or cultural context. Ekphrasis enhances the original art and takes on a life of its own through its brilliant descriptions.

In ancient times, when ekphrasis was understood and learned as a tool of rhetoric, it was a formal and somewhat complex way of describing objects. It might refer to any object, person, or experience. "Ode to a Grecian Urn," by John Keats, is a classic example familiar to many of us by name if not content.

Perhaps the earliest example of ekphrasis is a long description of a shield made by Hephaistos and given to Achilles by his mother (Book 18 of the Iliad.)

In 2008, Alfred Corn posted "Notes on Ekphrasis" on the website Poets.org. He suggests, "The most effective contemporary poems dealing with visual art are those where the authors include themselves in the poem. Recounting background circumstances that led to a viewing of the painting or sculpture in question, what memories or association or emotions it stirs in them."

Whether ancient or contemporary, art historians and critics agree that complete and accurate verbal descriptions of visual art are very hard to achieve, even in prose. When the expectations associated with good poetry are part of the goal as well, writing a good ekphrastic poem is a challenging task.

Kim M. Baker, writing specialist at Roger Williams School of Law and modern ekphrastic poet, has been inspired by the art of several Cape Cod women. She relates, "I first heard the word 'ekphrasis' in my poetry workshop three years ago.

"Our workshop leader, award-winning poet and playwright Barbara K. Schweitzer, talked to us about ekphrastic poetry, read us examples, and asked us to write an ekphrasis for the next workshop. I had recently bought a giclee art print of well-known Provincetown artist Anne Packard, so I wrote a poem about Ms. Packard's work. I felt moved and released. A poetic form that enabled me to express my feelings and thoughts about a painting? I fell in love with the concept!"

Ms. Baker adds, "Since then, I have been drawn to the Cape and to Cape artists, attending art shows at Cotuit Center for the Arts, Cape Cod Museum of Art, and Cultural Center of Cape Cod, as well as visiting well-known Cape Cod galleries, such as Addison Gallery in Orleans. Paintings are magical stories. My favorite thing to do with ekphrasis is to tell the story, the one I can see in the painting and the one that is only hinted at or that I can imagine just beyond the canvas."

When I received Ms. Baker's ekphrasis, "Keeping Christmas" (after my painting Winter Hoxie House), I was profoundly touched. The simple image of a 17th century Cape Cod house nestled in a field of snow came to life. I was transported to another time. The imaginary footsteps painted in the forefront had owners. Their lives and manners, as well as their dreams, were all revealed.

Although I had created the painting, I now experienced it on a far more interesting and exciting level.





Hoxie House, oil painting by Kathryn Kleekamp

Keeping Christmas

by Kim Baker

Even rabbits and deer realize Christmas is forbidden here,
perhaps hide under the fir's skirt
or that faraway forest dense as solemn intensity.
In this winter-bare landscape of a late Cape Cod day,
no sprig of holly garnishes this Puritan door,
no wreath surrounds these outdoor pine boughs,
except for a garland of snow nestling the evergreen
with no prints or pine cones visible beneath.

Reverend John Smith and his bride Susanna pride themselves
a good Christian minister and a good wife,
couldn't imagine a life such as this in which color
comes only from the late afternoon sun in the palest peach
and music is simply the wind playing the fiddle of twigg'd trees
and all adoration is God's,
not tankards of holiday grog nor alluring presents,
just presence of mind not to act to excess,

except to slip out into the day slipping into a certain slant of light,
out away from their somber home
to make snow angels under an unseen tree,
to dream about a choir of children,
then tip toe back across the field within the same tracks,
slip back inside the fence askew, renewed,
one set of snowy prints the only clue to their appropriated festivity.

Mary Moquin is another Cape Cod artist whose painting *Year of the Crow* inspired one of Ms. Baker's poems. Mary was painting on site one day during her one-woman show at Cotuit when Kim arrived to "find some inspiration."

Kim went instantly to *Year of the Crow*, sat down on the floor, and started scribbling. Mary asked, "Penny for your thoughts?" Kim told Mary she was a poet who wrote ekphrastic poetry. She and Mary talked about the painting, Mary's inspiration for it, and what Kim was "seeing." Mary's recollections about the family who lived once on the property in the painting definitely made its way into the poem. As Mary later told the poet, "Your poem blew me away!"

While many exhibitions feature poetry and art, very few people are familiar with the term "ekphrasis." Ms. Baker hopes to change that and in so doing, create an even greater understanding and appreciation of the magical power of art and poetry.



Year of the Crow, Mixed Media Painting
by Mary Moquin

Displaced Crows

by Kim Baker

Out back, we shell peas to accompany the meager dinner
we will try to enjoy since the farm has turned to seed,
since they began to trespass,
as in Aesop's Crow and the Pitcher,
to drop pebbles in the lake of our acres hoping

to drink us off our ancestral land.

Two swoop from the lavender sky.
We don't need to see their cemetery eyes
when we sense the wax of their black rapture,
their shadows eclipsing our vision.

A third of the murder surveys the lay of our land from the roof---
red tractor rusting into still life,
green fields receding to primeval,
blueberry bush abandoned by less foreboding birds.

They appraise the deserted house next door
where the Brown family disappeared
after generations renting here,
assess window casings flaking red grief
witness the omission of doors and floors,
reflect on window panes, stained with emptiness,
ready to rupture or chink.

As we unclothe the laundry line,
we whisper the myths of crows,
those that protected the infant Dalai Lama,
the one the Hindu king decided to ride astride,
seven supposedly holding grandmother's head up
to see the other side as she lay dying.
But when they caw-caw-caw to each other,
we shudder and only the legends of their legerdemain remain.

At dinner tonight,
we'll push around the peas and carrots of our unease,
listen to those crows whispering in the thicket,
surmise the time has come to decide that this farm is big enough
for humans fearful of chiaroscuro
and displaced crows encroaching on our pebbled lives.



Kathryn Kleekamp is the author of [Cape Cod and the Islands: Where Beauty and History Meet](#).

She is an artist member of the [Cape Cod Art Association](#) and a member in Letters and Art of the [National League of American Pen Women](#). Her work is in private collections all over the United States and Europe.

Kathryn lives with her husband, Charles, in Sandwich. She is the mother of three adult children.

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