

What is Ekphrasis?

Ekphrasis (also spelled "ecphrasis") is a direct transcription from the Greek *ek*, "out of," and *phrasis*, "speech" or "expression." Ekphrasis is the dramatic description of a visual work of art. In ancient times it referred to a description of any thing, person, or experience and seems originally to have been used as a rhetorical term designating a passage in prose or poetry that describes something. More narrowly, it could designate a passage providing a short speech attributed to a mute work of visual art. In recent decades, the use of the term has been limited, first, to *visual* description and then even more specifically to the description of a real or imagined work of visual art.

The goal of Ekphrasis is to make the reader envision the thing described as if it were physically present.

Homer's description of Achilles' shield in Book 18 of the *Iliad* stands at the beginning of the ekphrastic tradition by implicitly comparing visual and verbal means of description, most dramatically by weaving elements that could not be part of a shield (like movement and sound) with things that could be (like physical material and visual details). This emphasizes the possibilities of the verbal and the limitations of the visual. The thing being described comes to seem real in the imagination of the reader.

Many writers in subsequent centuries followed Homer's lead and wrote ekphrastic descriptions. During the Italian Renaissance, the rhetorical form became an important literary genre and, in a surprising twist, artists made visual works based on written descriptions of art that had never existed. A famous 19th-century example of ekphrastic poetry is John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," written in 1819. Like Homer, Keats mixed descriptions of things that could have been visible on a Greek vase with things that could not have been. Unlike Homer, Keats made himself and his own experience of viewing the vase an important part of the poem. This shift in emphasis reflects a transformation in the genre of ekphrasis, which increasingly came to include the reaction of a particular viewer as part of the description of an object.

In the second half of the 18th century, ekphrastic writing suddenly appeared in a new context. Travellers and would-be travellers provided a growing public eager for vivid descriptions of works of art. Without any way of publishing accurate reproductions, appearances had to be conveyed through words alone. William Hazlitt, John Ruskin, and Walter Pater, to name three great 19th-century writers in English, published grand set-pieces of ekphrasis about older as well as contemporary art. For them, the fact that the object existed mattered a great deal. The goal of these Victorian writers was to make the reader feel like a participant in the visual experience. The more convincingly this was done, the more effective the writing was judged to be.